

S. H. Clough.

THE MILLION-DOLLAR DIAMOND

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Daniel Vandamarke, the South African millionaire, possessed an extraordinary diamond, and was simple enough to let people know he carried it in his waistcoat pocket. The inevitable happens, and the reader is plunged into the excitements of a modern kidnapping, with its attendant romantic adventures.

But the vital point of the story is its secret, which is kept from all the actors, except one, and in such a fashion that the revealing of it comes as a surprise where laughter lurks. This is one of those stories in which movement, quick and dramatic, begins at once and never stops.

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THE MILLION-DOLLAR DIAMOND

BY
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HERBERT JENKINS LIMITED
3 YORK STREET ST. JAMES'S
LONDON S.W.1 ⌘ ⌘ MCMXXIII



Printed in Great Britain at the Athenæum Printing Works, Redhill.

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THE MILLION-DOLLAR DIAMOND

CHAPTER I

THE HOODED MEN

MR. DANIEL VANDAMARKE became a member of our golf club—the Marton Hill—in the early autumn of 1919. He was introduced by two City men. They seemed to know little of him. Nor did any other member know more. All that was known lay within the region of rumour. He was a millionaire. He had recently come to London from South Africa. He lived in a palatial mansion in Prince's Gate. He had extensive business dealings amongst the high financiers.

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He was a Big Man. Actually seen at close quarters, Mr. Vandamarke was an elderly, modest-mannered, inconspicuous, somewhat plump little person with a trim beard and twinkling eyes; the sort of man who is inclined to listen rather than to talk. However, when he did talk, you speedily became aware of two facts; one, that his conversation was well worth your while; the other, that in his time he had travelled in every corner of the globe and had known many men and cities.

Mr. Vandamarke's notions about golf were peculiarly his own. He was totally indifferent as to whether he took two or twenty strokes between tee and green; he had no objection to standing aside while more energetic players went through; on one particular only was he adamant—however long it took him, he would have his round. Although he never said so, it was very plain that his real object was exercise: to skill and proficiency he made no pretence. Consequently, Mr. Vandamarke never went out with men who were masters of the game: he liked to find an opponent who was inclined to take things as easily and leisurely as he

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himself did. This was the reason why he conceived a fancy for me—young enough to be his grandson!—and why I frequently meandered—no other word so well expresses our journeyings—around the links with him. His rate of progression suited me, for at that time I was little more than convalescent after a long spell in hospital, the result of wounds picked up in the last stages of the war, and I wanted fresh air and gentle exercise more than powerful driving and accurate putting. Mr. Vandamarke's eyes used to twinkle behind his gold spectacles when he found me idling about the clubhouse; in my condition I was just his man. As a rule it took him three hours to go round; he would then trifle away another over tea and cigarettes before sauntering off to catch a train back to town. As often as not, I accompanied him on this homeward journey, and we came to be something of friends. The situation of Marton Hill is, in its way, peculiar. Although within twenty-five miles of London, the stretch of land over which the links are laid out is, at first view, utterly out of the world; a slice of broken country, undulating and

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wild, apparently far off from anywhere. It is, moreover, shut in by dense woods and coverts, and from the verandah in front of the club-house there is not a house, nor a lonely cottage, nor even a church spire in sight. Nevertheless, the world is not so far away, for behind the spinneys on the east side, deep down in a narrow valley closed in by hanging woods, there are two means of communication with busier scenes and places—one, a high road, leading from London to the South; the other, somewhat further off, a railway which carries folk to Victoria. It was by this railway that Mr. Vandamarke and myself travelled of an afternoon to Marton Hill and back to London in the early evening. Doubtless no one ever noticed the habits of such an utterly insignificant individual as myself in this respect, but subsequent events proved that Mr. Vandamarke's procedure was noted carefully. He was essentially the sort of man who does things as it were by the clock, and after his introduction to the club he formed a habit of going back to town by the 5.53 train. It will be well to explain what he had to do in order to catch it. The

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distance between the club-house and the station—a mere platform, at which only certain trains drew up—may be estimated in time at twenty minutes. The way led first through the spinneys and afterwards by a deep-set, lonely lane which eventually crossed the high road. At that point you climbed a stile, walked across two meadows by a field path, and came to the little station. It was at the junction of the narrow lane and the wide high road that Mr. Vandamarke and myself were kidnapped at a quarter to six of an October evening and carried off we knew not whither.

The way of it was this—we had spent the afternoon together in the usual fashion, and having congratulated ourselves at the eighteenth hole on a—for us—highly successful performance, had idled away an hour over tea in the club-house. At half-past five we set out for the station. We were the only two going back to town by that train; some of our fellow members were settling down to cards; others had their cars waiting; Mr. Vandamarke and I, anyway, had the spinneys and the lonely lane to ourselves. It was already growing dark as

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we descended towards the valley; grey mists, too, were clinging about the firs and pines; my companion made some remark about the English climate which led me to refer to the severity of the previous winter.

"Not within my knowledge," he answered, with a laugh. "I haven't seen an English winter for I don't know how many years! Known some stiff ones, though—elsewhere!"

There was that in his tone—as there often was—that suggested a deep and peculiar knowledge, and knowing him well enough by that time, I ventured on a personal remark that no doubt sounded like an invitation.

"I should think there's precious little you haven't known, eh, Mr. Vandamarke?" I said. "Knocked about the world a good lot, haven't you?"

"Been everywhere, and seen everything!" he asserted, with a dry laugh. "Ever since I was a mere lad, I've knocked round. Seen many queer things, too."

"What are the queerest?" I asked.

"Men!" he answered, promptly, and with

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a curious grim tone. "Which, of course, includes women. Animals, now—brute animals—they aren't in it with humans! Been studying human nature all my life—and haven't got near the depths yet. Odd!"

"You've had adventures?" I suggested;

"Adventures!" he exclaimed with another of his dry laughs. "Ah! Enough to fill a couple of thick volumes. I'm the sort of man that always has adventures. I—good lord! Is this another?" He had reason for his sudden astonishment. Just there the lane narrowed, before opening out on the high road; it was gloomy, too, under the shadows of the overhanging trees. From amongst the thick bushes on our right emerged three men; big, squarely built, hefty fellows, who clustered round us in a fashion that was as ugly as it was determined. But it was not so much their movements as their appearance which struck me. Each man wore a curious hood—a hood that completely covered head and shoulders and came down as far as the waist. Over the head it terminated in a peak two round holes were cut in front throug

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which the wearer could look ; there were two other openings at the sides through which the arms were thrust. Startled though I was, I noticed that each man wore a tweed suit, and that the sleeves were not creased ; evidently our assailants were smartly dressed men. But beyond all this there was something else ; something far more important. Each man handled—in a very business-like way—an automatic revolver.

Mr. Vandamarke, after his first exclamation, stood stock still. I heard him fetch a quick breath ; then there was silence, broken by the tallest of the three hooded men.

“ Mr. Vandamarke ! ” he said, in quick staccato tones. “ This is a hold-up ! We want you—and since he chances to be with you, your young companion. Give no trouble, and no harm will come to you. Now first and sharp—are either of you armed ? Remember !—I can have you searched within the minute ! ”

Mr. Vandamarke let out one word.

“ No ! ”

“ I have no arms,” said I.

“ Good ! ” exclaimed the man. “ Then—

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round the corner and into our car! No need to be afraid, either of you—but you've got to obey. Come—quick march!"

We marched—there was nothing else for it. But Mr. Vandamarke threw a question over his shoulder.

"Where?"

"Our business!" retorted the big man. "As I said—give no trouble, Mr. Vandamarke, and no harm will befall you. You'll sleep in your own bed to-night!"

We rounded the corner. There, on the side of the high road, was a big, powerful, closed travelling car. They bundled us into it without ceremony; two of them, one of whom was the man who had so far conducted the conversation, followed; the third went to the front: he, I saw, was going to drive, and I gathered from that that there was no fourth man. But we had small opportunity of seeing anything, for as soon as we and our captors had entered the car all the blinds were drawn at sides and front, and of the driver I saw no more. Probably, we being secured, he whipped off his hood, assumed more normal garments, and ceased to be remarkable: anyway, within a minute, we

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were off,—caught and caged. There was just enough light within the car to enable me to see that the two men who shared it with us sat facing us, close to the doors on either side. But I paid no attention to them: I was concentrating all my attention on our direction. The car was headed southward when we entered it; it went off southward. But within a few minutes it made a sharp turn to the left; a few minutes later, another to the right; within half an hour we had made so many turns that I grew confused, and found it impossible to judge whether we were going east or west, south or north. And suddenly one of our captors switched on an electric light. I saw then that we were being carried away in a car which must have cost its owner a lot of money. It was a big, roomy affair, capacious enough to seat half-a-dozen people; luxuriously upholstered and appointed, and fitted with all sorts of aids to comfort and convenience. But I looked in vain for any crest, monogram, or other indication of ownership; there was no more to be learnt in that way than from the sinister figures confronting us.

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With the turning on of the light, Mr. Vandamarke, who had hitherto sat silently at my side, suddenly bent forward to our principal guardian.

“Since you appear to be so very conversant with my affairs and movements,” he observed, with undisguised sarcasm, “you are probably aware that I have a daughter.”

“Quite well aware of that, Mr. Vandamarke,” replied the man’s lips.

“My daughter expects me home to dinner at seven-thirty,” said Mr. Vandamarke. “She will be distressed if I’m not there.”

“Make yourself easy, Mr. Vandamarke!” said the polite voice. “We thought of that. Your daughter will have received a telegram from you by now, informing her that an unexpected engagement will detain you until a late hour. All’s well, Mr. Vandamarke! You’ll go safely home to bed when we’ve done with you.”

“Very kind of you, I’m sure!” remarked Mr. Vandamarke. “For men of your kidney, you’re both polite and thoughtful. And pray what do you want with me?”

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But that's a foolish question of mine!—I can guess, well enough."

"Then there's no need to interrogate me, Mr. Vandamarke," retorted our captor. "I'm glad, though, that you think us thoughtful and polite. We endeavour to be both. I hope you are quite comfortable. Smoke if you wish to—we ourselves, as you see, cannot, at present."

Mr. Vandamarke drew out his cigar-case and adopted the suggestion. He smoked in silence for a while, eyeing his captors closely. I, too, was inspecting them—or, rather, as much of their garments as I could see. One wore a brown, the other, a grey tweed suit—good stuff, fashionably cut. Their boots were good, too—first-class, expensive boots. And the man who had done all the talking spoke in quiet, cultured tones—the voice of a gentleman.

"I'm wondering if I've ever heard your voice before!" suddenly exclaimed Mr. Vandamarke. "I think I have!"

"And I think you have not, Mr. Vandamarke!" answered our captor. "Which is a polite way of saying that you certainly haven't. You have never met me before,

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and you'll never meet me again—after this evening.”

“ See about that ! ” muttered Mr. Vandamarke. “ Shan't forget your voice, anyhow ! ”

For my part I was wishing that I had something more tangible than a voice to remember. I saw little chance of ever identifying our kidnappers. No end of men wear well-cut suits of brown tweed and grey tweed, and it is hard to pick out one pair of smart shoes from another. And the voice was not particularly noticeable—it was that of any ordinarily well-educated Englishman. If I could only just get something ! . . . and then, all of a sudden, I got it. The car, at that time, had been running continuously, and at a considerable rate of speed, for somewhat over an hour. It slackened in pace ; slowed down ; stopped. There was an interval of silence ; then one of the doors opened and the third man, hooded again, appeared. And as he placed his right hand on the edge of the door, I noticed that its little finger was curiously bent and twisted and had a livid scar at the knuckle where it joined on to the hand. I knew, from wide

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experience, that what I saw there was the result of a bullet wound.

“Now, if you please, Mr. Vandamarke—and your young friend,” said the principal bandit. “Alight!—we are arrived.”

We got out. I looked round. It was dark by that time, but I could make out that we were in a sort of courtyard with three sides of what was evidently an old, high-gabled house around us. There was a light—a feeble light—in front, and our body-guard led us towards it. It proved to be in an oak-panelled hall, but of that we saw little. Once inside, a door opened, and we were gently pushed into a small room in which a lamp burned on a centre table, and a cheery fire blazed on the hearth. The door closed on us as we entered: we heard the key turn on the outside.

Mr. Vandamarke's first proceedings interested me. As soon as we were fairly within the room, and alone, he looked round. The room itself was a very ordinary twelve-feet-square parlour, plainly furnished. There was an inner door on one side; a window, curtained, on another. Mr. Vandamarke went over and tried the door—it was locked.

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He crossed the room and drew the curtain from the window—it was barred. Then he turned to me with a grim smile and an emphatic nod.

“Trapped all right, this time, Gregg, my boy!” he said. “They’ve got us safe enough. I’m sorry about you, though.”

“I don’t think that matters, Mr. Vandamarke,” I answered. “They collared me because I was with you. When they’ve done with you, they’ve done with me—I’m of no more importance than your stick. But——”

“But—what?” he asked, as I paused.

“I’m anxious about you,” I said. “What do they want with you?”

“I know—well enough!” he replied grimly. “Knew from the first! Well—can’t be helped. One more adventure.”

I was about to reply that adventures in which hooded men armed with revolvers figured were not over pleasant, when the inner door opened and one of our captors appeared bearing a tray on which were set out sandwiches, whisky, and mineral water. With a brief but polite request that we would

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refresh ourselves, he retired as speedily as he had come—but not before I had recognised the twisted finger again.

“ I shall know that man, anyway,” I remarked, as I picked up a sandwich. “ He’s marked !—— ” and I explained what I meant. My fellow-prisoner shook his head.

“ That’s if you ever come across him again,” he said. “ But this is a crafty, deep-laid scheme, lad, and the odds are that we shall never encounter any one of these fellows. This has all been carefully arranged—and I haven’t the least notion as to where we are ! How far do you think we rode in that car ? ”

“ From the time we were in it, I should think from thirty to forty miles,” I replied. “ But I have no notion as to whether we were taken south or north, west or east. One thing’s certain—we’re a long way from Marton Hill, Mr. Vandamarke.”

He gave me a queer, half-shy, half-amused glance over the glass which he was just then raising to his lips.

“ Are we ? ” he said, dryly. “ Well—perhaps ! ”

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I stared at him in surprise.

"We were driving for over an hour!" I exclaimed.

"Just so, Gregg," he answered. "And—we might have been driving round and round the neighbourhood—bluff! However——"

Just then the inner door opened, and a hooded head looked in.

"Mr. Vandamarke—please to walk this way," it commanded. "Your friend will stay where he is. Pray bring your glass with you, Mr. Vandamarke—our talk will be the more friendly and cheerful."

Mr. Vandamarke grunted something which I did not catch. But, glass in hand, he went through that door. It was locked again: I was alone.

I stood listening for some time, but heard nothing. No sound came from the room into which Mr. Vandamarke had gone. There was nothing to observe in my prison—not even a book in which I might have found a name scrawled. I went over to the window, and slipping behind the heavy curtain looked out on the courtyard. And suddenly I was aware of a man who paced up and down

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in the darkness—up and down, up and down, sentry-like. He paused and struck a match as I watched and held it to a cigar between his lips. For nearly a minute I had a full clear, accurate view of his face.

CHAPTER II

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IT would have been foolish, under the circumstances, if I had not taken a keen observation of this man—or, rather, of as much as I could see of him. It was a good match that he struck; it flared up beautifully, and as he held it to the point of his cigar it lighted up his features. There was nothing unusual, striking or remarkable about them: I was conscious of a feeling of disappointment that there wasn't: I could have remembered him better if there had been. But I knew I should not forget him, that I should recognise him easily enough if I met him again. Yet it was a face the like of which you may meet by the thousand—the face of a typical, good-looking Englishman, plainish, moustached, well-fed, carefully shaved. And the man was presumably about thirty-five, pos-

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sibly forty; tall, somewhat broadly built. As to the rest of him I could see nothing, except that he wore a soft cap, well drawn down over his forehead, and seemed to be wrapped in a big ulster overcoat.

He moved away after lighting his cigar, and for a minute or two longer I watched him. He paced up and down the courtyard; the glowing end of the cigar showed me where he went. But presently, hearing a click of the door in the room behind me, I slipped back through the curtains, anxious lest any of our captors should catch me looking out of the window. No sooner was I back in the room than the inner door opened and Mr. Vandamarke emerged. The door was once more shut from without, and locked.

Mr. Vandamarke was carrying his glass in his hand: empty. I knew him for a very abstemious man who never touched anything but a cup of tea at the club-house. But now he walked straight to the table and helped himself to a second tumbler of whisky and soda. He drank it off at a draught, and turning to me, smiled—queerly.

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"Well, that's over, Gregg, my boy!" he said, almost cheerily. "Short—sweet!"

"I don't know what it is that's over, Mr. Vandamarke," said I.

He put his hands in his pockets, seemed to rattle whatever loose money lay there, and gave me a wink.

"The really pertinent business is over!" he said. "Their business! What they brought us—brought me—here for."

"And I'm just as much in the dark as ever!" I retorted. "What did they bring us—you—here for? I don't know, Mr. Vandamarke!"

He chuckled, with a grim look about his lips and eyes, and taking out his case, made a great show of choosing and lighting a cigar. But I noticed that his fingers trembled a little as he struck a match.

"Don't, eh?" he said. "Well, I'll tell you. Robbery!"

"They—wanted to rob you?" I exclaimed.

"About it, my lad—just that!" he answered coolly. "Done me, too! There are situations, Gregg, in which a man's at a disadvantage. Such as when you're

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in a strange house, with three masked men all armed with nasty-looking guns! When you're calmly and determinedly requested to stand and deliver, under those circumstances, it's best to deliver—quickly. Eh? "

"Then—you've been robbed?" I suggested.

But I was looking him over. He was one of those men who are rather too ostentatious about jewellery. There was a diamond in his cravat which a man at the club had once whispered to me must be worth a small fortune: he had a similar one in a ring on his little finger: he wore a solid gold chain at the end of which was a very fine watch. All these things were still on him. He saw me glance at them, and he laughed.

"Pooh!—not that sort of thing—not petty larceny—if that's the word," he observed, sarcastically. "Careful preparations demand big results. Well—over, as I say, and I wish they'd let me go."

I stared at him, silently wondering—not so much about his loss, whatever it might be, as at his coolness. But since he volunteered no information beyond what he had already given, I did not ask him for any. I, too,

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was anxious to be off and kept turning from one door to another. Presently that by which we had first entered was unlocked and pushed open. There, in the dimly-lighted hall, stood the three hooded men.

“ Now, Mr. Vandamarke ! ” said the leader, in his suavest, most courteous tones. “ The car awaits your pleasure.”

Mr. Vandamarke walked out of our prison with me at his heels.

“ If your car’s at my pleasure,” he said, growlingly, though I believe the growl was affected, “ it will carry me straight to my house in Prince’s Gate, London. I’m an hour late for my dinner now, and dinner’s an important thing when a man gets to my age.”

The leader laughed as he conducted us out of the house and across the courtyard.

“ I’m afraid we can’t do that, Mr. Vandamarke,” he answered. “ But we’ll do the very best we can for you, which is to put you down where you’ll be in direct and speedy touch with London. We’re men of our word, you see—you’ll sleep in your own bed to-night ! ”

“ Much obliged to you for your considera-

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tion!" retorted Mr. Vandamarke, sarcastically. "But I'm sufficient of a scholar to remark that you've had a *quid* for your *quo*! However—that's neither here nor there—we want to see the last of you!"

He got into the car and bundling himself into the furthest corner, relapsed into silence. I followed; two of the men followed me. Once more, with blinds tightly drawn over all the windows, we set off. As one of our guardians turned on the light, I looked at my watch. Twenty minutes past eight: we had been in the strange house nearly three quarters of an hour.

It was a beautifully smooth-running car, that—we rolled off and onward in great comfort. Suddenly the leader bent forward to Mr. Vandamarke.

"We have a good hour's ride, Mr. Vandamarke," he observed with a pleasant laugh. "What do you say to a game of cards? We have the material."

I glanced at my companion. To my surprise, I saw a sudden gleam in his eye. He sat up.

"Have you ready money on you?" he asked.

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"I daresay we can manage that!" asserted the inquirer with another laugh. "Here are cards. Now, what shall we play, Mr. Vandamarke? You and your friend shall name the game."

"Leave me out!" said I. "I don't want to play—moreover, I've no money, except a few shillings."

"Leave him out!" commanded Mr. Vandamarke. "I don't allow boys to play with me, because I never play cards unless it is for money, and youngsters have no business to risk money at cards or at anything else. Well, I'll play with you. We'll play Blind Hookey."

The leader, who had let down a flap that served as a table between the back and front seats of the car, and was now trifling with a pack of new cards, let the cards drop from his fingers and stared: I imagine, anyway, that he stared from the fashion in which he turned his hooded face on Mr. Vandamarke.

"Blind Hookey!" he exclaimed. "Heard of it, of course—but—isn't it sheer gambling? Just—gambling!"

"Precisely!" asserted Mr. Vandamarke.

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"And exactly the game under the circumstances."

The leader turned his eyeholes towards his companion, who nodded. "Oh, well!" said the leader. "Blind Hookey then. But—how do you play it?"

"Simple!" replied Mr. Vandamarke. "You pass the pack from hand to hand after taking a small number of cards off the top, after which, without looking at the cards, each player speculates on what he has chanced to get. That's all!"

"Glaring gamble!—wicked!" exclaimed the leader. "I'm surprised at a highly-respectable gentleman like you, Mr. Vandamarke! However—well, show the way!"

They began to play. I sat by and watched. I speedily learnt two or three things. Whatever else they had robbed Mr. Vandamarke of in that house, they had left him his note-case. He produced it,—bursting with notes. The other men produced note-cases too, from under their hoods—they, also, were well provided. So much for that!—but what was more interesting to me, was the evidence of Mr. Vandamarke's extraordinary luck. He won, and won, and won!—always

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playing with a careless coolness which proved to me that with him luck was invariable and regular. The other men's notes steadily joined his own pile, and at last the leader leaned back from the table.

"That'll do!" he said with a rueful laugh. "Cleaned out!"

"So am I," said his companion. "Utterly!"

Mr. Vandamarke swept up the notes—a goodly pile—and put them away in his pocket.

"Always had luck at cards," he remarked ruminatively. "Queer!—but it always was so. Much obliged to you for the entertainment. And when are we going to part?"

The parting came ten minutes later—when we had been riding for more than an hour. The car slowed down, stopped. The lights went out inside: the door opened. Mr. Vandamarke and I, bidden to dismount, stepped out into the darkness. I saw that we were on a high road, and that some little distance, perhaps a mile, in front of us, and at a lower elevation, were lights—the lights of a town.

"Where are we?—where are you leaving

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us?" demanded Mr. Vandamarke. "This looks like a wilderness! Where——"

"Walk forward to the town, Mr. Vandamarke, and you will know where you are," answered the leader, with a quiet, reassuring laugh. "You'll soon be home in Prince's Gate. And—good-night!"

The next instant the car had moved on. But it only went a few score yards along the road. Then it stopped, turned—a moment later it went past us at a faster pace and vanished. We set our faces towards the town.

"Where can we be?" asked Mr. Vandamarke. "Strange country!—and at this time. It must be——"

"More than half-past-nine o'clock," said I. "However, if this place, whatever it is, is on a line to London, we shall soon get home."

"You don't know that, Gregg," he answered. "We may be a mighty long way from London, and there mayn't be trains at this time. We came a good distance in that car!"

"I think those fellows meant what they said," I answered. "And those lights across

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there look like the lights of a biggish station. Anyway—we're free again. May I ask a question, Mr. Vandamarke? "

"A thousand, my lad, if you like!" he said. "Ten thousand!"

"One will do," said I. "It's a pertinent one. Have you any idea as to the identity of these men?"

"No!—none!" he exclaimed promptly. "No more than you have. What could you identify them by but voice? I didn't recognise any voice that I heard."

"All the same," I suggested, "they must have known a good deal about you and your habits."

"That's certain, my lad!" he agreed. "Oh, yes—clever devils, very! But let's get home, Gregg. I've a daughter—all I've got—mere girl yet—and I'm anxious about her. Hang the rest of it—home's the object."

We quickened our pace along the road and soon came to the outskirts of the unknown town. Two men came out of a way-side inn, and I hurried up to them.

"What's the town we're coming to?" I inquired.

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The men paused, and in the light of a neighbouring lamp, looked at me wonderingly.

"Name?" said one, as if astonished. "This is Basingstoke!"

"Good lord!" I muttered to myself, making a rough guess that we were some sixty or seventy miles from the spot whereat we had been kidnapped. Then, aloud:

"Basingstoke! How far is it from London?"

The men looked at each other.

"Oh, matter o' forty miles or so," said one. "Bit more, maybe."

"Have you any idea what time there's a train up?" I asked. "And can you show me the nearest way to the station?"

"There's a South-Western at 10.17, ain't there, Bill?" remarked one man. "Due Waterloo about 11.30, I think. That's all I knows of, but——"

But here Mr. Vandamarke who had listened silently, broke into the conversation.

"Nearly an hour to wait, Gregg!" he exclaimed impatiently. "Waste of time! Here, my lads, do you know where there's a garage where I can hire a first-class car?"

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Yes?—then show me and there's a couple of pounds for you."

I let him take things into his own hands after that. The men led us to a garage: Mr. Vandamarke rewarded them and began to explain his desires to the proprietor. Within ten minutes we were off again—in a fast car to London. He scarcely spoke until we were well within the western suburbs. Then he suddenly rapped out a question. "Anybody expecting you, Gregg? Mother—eh?"

"No!" said I. "I live alone—in rooms. I'm all right, Mr. Vandamarke—doesn't matter what time I get home. Nobody but myself."

"Then come home with me," he said. "We'll have some supper—and maybe a talk. Supper first, though."

I accepted his invitation readily, for I was curious about him and about the mystery of the evening. We rode up to Prince's Gate soon after eleven; he paid our driver handsomely and led me into a palatial mansion, where a butler of unusual grandeur and solemnity received us in the entrance hall. With him Mr. Vandamarke held a

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brief conversation ; then he took me by the arm.

“ No doubt those chaps we’ve been mixed up with this evening were scamps, Gregg ! ” he whispered as we walked down the hall, “ but they were truthful scamps ! They did send that telegram they spoke of—you know ; telling my daughter I’d be late. That’s all right !—she’s gone to her by-by on the strength of it. Artful scamps too !—they despatched it from Marton Hill, in my name. So—what is it ? ”

For I had started, and he had felt it. I replied to his inquiring look with a laugh.

“ Rather gave themselves away there, didn’t they, Mr. Vandamarke ? ” I said. “ They couldn’t go into a small country post-office with those remarkable hoods on ! I suppose one went in—without his hood. Very well !—we can get a description of him from the post-office people at Marton Hill.”

“ Good lad ! ” he said approvingly. “ I shouldn’t have thought of that. Yes—we might certainly do a bit of tracing that way.”

“ And in others, Mr. Vandamarke,” said I. “ Now that you’re safe home I’ll tell

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you something. I can identify two men who were concerned in this outrage or whatever you like to call it—that is, if we can trace them.”

“ You can ? ” he exclaimed. “ Why—just how ? ”

I told him about the man with the twisted finger and the face I had seen by the light of the match. He listened attentively—once, he knitted his brows as if trying to remember something.

“ Odd !—odd ! ” he said musingly. “ Um !—interesting, Gregg, interesting ! And they say there’s no adventure and no romance now-a-days ! Isn’t there ! But come into my little snugery—they’ll bring us some supper there.”

He opened a door at the end of the hall and ushered me into a quaint and curious room, the like of which I had never seen before. And he laughed as he saw me look round it, noting the astonishment in my eyes.

“ Never seen a room like this before, eh, my boy ? ” he asked. “ Don’t know what it is, do you ? It’s a replica of a Dutch farmstead parlour, all complete ! Dutch

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blood in me, far away back, and I've a feeling for this room—that's why I had it rigged up. All genuine old stuff—no imitation—from floor to ceiling. I like to sit here—suits me better than the grand rooms in the rest of this mansion.

Then crossing to the hearth, he pointed to the only English and modern thing in the place—an expensively-framed photograph of a charming and pretty girl.

"My little lady!" he said admiringly. "All I have! What do you think of her, boy? All there, isn't she?"

"I hope I may be allowed to see the original, sir," said I. "Could I say more?—or pay a greater compliment?"

"By George, you couldn't!" he exclaimed, clapping me on the shoulder. "And see her you shall—to-morrow. But here's the supper."

The butler and a footman appeared, laid out food and wine, and left us. For a time my host ate and drank in silence. Suddenly, with one of his characteristically abrupt movements he leaned across the table towards me.

"Gregg!" he said, with a queer smile.

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“ You don’t know what those fellows were after ? ”

“ I, Mr. Vandamarke ? No !—haven’t the remotest idea ! ”

“ You’re a straight young fellow,” he continued. “ I’ll tell you. They were after a diamond ! ”

“ A diamond ? ” I exclaimed. “ Literally—a diamond ? ”

“ Aye ! ” he answered quietly. “ A diamond ! But—it’s worth two hundred thousand pounds ! ”

CHAPTER III

THE OTHER GUEST

I DROPPED my knife and fork in sheer astonishment, staring at my host as if he had suddenly announced—anything that could hardly be credited. And when I spoke, I daresay my words sounded sufficiently fatuous to make him smile.

“ Why—why ! ” I said. “ Is—is there such a thing ? ”

“ As what ? ” said he.

“ As—as a diamond worth all that ? A diamond—one stone !—worth two hundred thousand pounds ? ”

He laughed as a man of knowledge laughs at ignorance—indulgently.

“ The Cullinan diamond—which I saw soon after it was found—was insured for a quarter of a million when it was sent off to England,” he answered quietly. “ Oh, yes,

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my lad! Anyway, my diamond is worth—what I said.”

“Two hundred thousand pounds!” said I, still amazed. “Good heavens!”

“My price!” he remarked. “Fancy, if you like, Gregg. But, on the present market, there is no such stone. I brought it over with me when I and my little girl came here a few months ago. The Vandamarke Diamond!—there isn’t another stone like it in the world. They cut the Cullinan in pieces, you know—forget how many pieces—and it’s in the Royal regalia. But mine—intact!”

“And you say those fellows were after it, Mr. Vandamarke?” I exclaimed. “Did—did they get it?”

For answer he thrust his hand inside his waistcoat, and from some pocket in there, drew out a small, square leather-covered case or box, which he held out in my direction. Pressing a spring which released the lid, he revealed a velvet padded cavity—empty.

“They got—what was in there!” he answered, grimly. “Oh, yes! Clever chaps those, Gregg!—they worked the whole busi-

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ness very well—brainy fellows! But they'd no luck when it came to Blind Hookey, had they?" he continued with a satisfied chuckle. "Had 'em there, anyway—my luck!"

I sat staring at him, full of wonder. Here was a man who had been robbed of a diamond worth two hundred thousand pounds and who was laughing because he'd won a fistful of pound and ten shilling notes from the robbers! His apparently phlegmatic humour was beyond me, and I picked up my knife and fork again and went on eating.

"You're a queer man, Mr. Vandamarke!" I said after a mouthful or two. "An unusually queer man!"

"Am I?" he answered, evidently highly delighted. "Ah, you think me a queer man, do you, Gregg? Now, why do you think me a queer man, eh?"

"I think any man would be considered queer who had a two hundred thousand pound diamond stolen from him and then hugged himself because he'd bested the thieves in a card gamble!" said I. "But there are queerer things about you than that!"

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"Such as—what?" he asked, still showing signs of pleasure at my remarks.

"Do you mean to say that you've been in the habit of carrying that diamond about with you?" I asked.

He tapped his chest—over the region to which he had restored the empty case. "Just there!" he answered. "Nice safe place!"

"As things have turned out, uncommonly safe!" said I, satirically. "The diamond is not there, Mr. Vandamarke."

He chuckled again, as if highly amused.

"Quite right, my lad!" he replied. "The Vandamarke Diamond is not there!"

"It would be somewhat strange if it were, I should think," said I. "Am I right in supposing, Mr. Vandamarke, that there were people who knew it was there?"

"You are, Gregg, you are!" he admitted. "There were—are—people who had that knowledge. Several!"

"People who've seen it?" I suggested.

"Several people have seen the diamond since I came to London," he replied coolly.

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"I've shown it to men in the City, and to the dealers in Hatton Garden, and to a few people deeply interested in such things, though not professionally—I've even shown it to one or two men at the golf club—I might have shown it to you if I'd happened to think of it."

"And did these people all know that you carried it on you, in that little box?" I asked.

"Several—most, perhaps—did," he replied, in the same cool fashion. "Saw me take it out, no doubt."

"Then all I can say, Mr. Vandamarke, is that I wonder you weren't robbed of your diamond long since!" said I with all the severity of youth. "Goodness gracious!—I wonder you haven't been murdered for it!"

He smiled thoughtfully, and rubbed his chin.

"Those chaps were certainly very thoughtful and polite!" he said, musingly. "Politest pirates I ever struck!—and I've struck several in my time. Quite considerate, weren't they—nice, toothsome sandwiches, and the whisky was unusually good and

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sound. And I won seventy-five pound from them ! ”

“ Well, you are a queer man ! ” said I.
“ Extraordinary ! ”

“ Seventy-five pound is seventy-five pound, my lad ! ” he observed seriously. “ That’s a fact, Gregg ! ”

“ Yes, and it’s a fact that two hundred thousand pound is two hundred thousand pound ! ” retorted I. “ What are you going to do about your diamond, Mr. Vandamarke—and the thieves ? ”

“ Track them down ! ” he answered, with a sudden stern look of determination. “ Oh, yes, my lad !—that goes without saying.”

“ A tough proposition, Mr. Vandamarke,” I observed. “ We haven’t a clue, beyond the very slight ones I mentioned half-an-hour ago. Besides—do you honestly think that those men would stay here after possessing themselves of a stone worth two hundred thousand pounds ? I don’t ! ”

“ Why, what would they do ? ” he asked.

“ I should say they’d go off in that car of theirs—to Harwich, or Dover, or Folke-

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stone—to any port from which they could reach the Continent,” I answered. “They’d be fools if they didn’t!”

“Anyway, I’ll run ’em down!” he declared. “There are ways.”

“The police?” I suggested. “Scotland Yard—detectives?”

“No detectives—no police!” he replied, firmly. “Don’t want that sort of thing. No!—leave it to me—sly old dog I am, Gregg, when necessary. You keep this to yourself. I’ve only told you about the diamond because they robbed you when they robbed me. However—no harm done to either of us—and I did clear out those chaps at the cards, didn’t I?”

He rose from the table, laughing, and unlocking a cigar cabinet, offered me a choice of its contents. Lighting a cigar himself he sat down in a deep chair by his Dutch hearth and put his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat. To look at him, you would have thought that the loss of his diamond affected him no more than if it had been a pebble.

“You take things very philosophically, Mr. Vandamarke,” I remarked.

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“What’s the use of doing anything else?” he said. “Best way—I think! Been through all sorts of queer adventures in my time, Gregg. Besides, you’ve always got something to be thankful for. Now, those chaps might easily have watched for me some time when I was coming down from the club-house alone, plugged a bullet into me, and left me dead. Instead, here I am, alive and kicking. No!—the only thing that upset me at all this evening was lest my little girl should be anxious about me. However—that was all right, and much obliged to the polite pirates. But that reminds me—I promised you should meet her. Come and dine to-morrow night—I mean to-day night, for it’s past twelve o’clock. You’ll come? — seven-thirty, sharp.”

“Thank you,” said I. “I will.”

“Good!” said he. “Quiet little dinner—self; daughter; you; my secretary, Mrs. Kennerley—smart woman, very smart, clever woman, Gregg!—and a City friend of mine, Mr. Guy Trafferdale—that’s the lot. Be here at seven.”

“And—the events of this evening, Mr.

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Vandamarke?" I suggested. "Are they to be spoken of——"

"Not unless I speak of them," he interrupted quickly. "No—as I said just now, leave things to me. I shan't even tell my daughter what's happened."

"Do you really think you'll lay hands on your diamond again, Mr. Vandamarke?" I asked, curious to know what he honestly felt. "Do you?"

He remained silent for a minute or two, watching the smoke curling from his cigar, and when he did speak, his tone was more serious than I had ever known it.

"Yes, Gregg, my boy!" he answered. "I do think I shall lay hands on my diamond again! But, odd as it may seem to you, I'm not so much concerned about that, or keen about that as about something else!"

"What?—if I may ask?" said I.

He gave me a sudden flashing glance and bent a little forward. "What I want to lay hands on," he said in low, intense tones, "is the gang that waylaid and carried us off this evening! And—I will!"

I saw Mr. Vandamarke in a new light

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then. He was a man of iron will and steel-like purpose, despite his surface-evident easy-goingness.

“ I’ll get ’em ! ” he added, presently. “ Like that ! ”

He pressed his thumb down on the arm of his chair, as if he were squashing an insect, and glanced at me as he did so. Action and glance meant a lot.

“ I see, Mr. Vandamarke ! ” said I, nodding at him. “ Without mercy ! ”

“ Precisely ! ” he answered, meeting my nod with another. “ Without mercy ! ”

I went away soon after that and walked slowly to my rooms in Jermyn Street. I was glad to be there ; the events of the evening had been exciting enough to make me thankful for a little quiet. But as soon as I had crossed my own threshold there came another surprise. I had a letter-box fitted within the outer door of my modest chambers ; from sheer force of habit I looked inside it. There lay a solitary letter. The address was typewritten on the envelope : everything in the sheet which I drew from it was typewritten, too—I mean, by that, that the address was typewritten as well

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as what followed. There was not much to read :—

327A, Birchin Lane, E.C.2.

October 8th, 1920.

“ Mervyn Gregg, Esq.—

“ DEAR SIR,—I understand that you, as an ex-officer are desirous of obtaining a post of trust. If you will be good enough to call upon me at the above address to-morrow afternoon at four o'clock sharp, I think I can make you an offer which you may like to consider.

“ Yours truly,

“ H. C. LEDDENHAM.”

I had not the remotest idea as to the identity of Mr. H. C. Leddenham : certainly I had never heard of such a person. But it was true that I was on the look-out for employment ; true that a good many people knew that I was, and I concluded that somebody had mentioned my name to him. And then I realised that if there was anything of a good chance in this, I had lost it—by going down to Marton Hill that

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afternoon ! As a matter of fact, I had gone in the morning, rather early, and had lunched at the golf club ; I had been idling round the links with Mr. Vandamarke when I ought to have been in the City. Somehow, the letter, instead of being delivered first thing in the morning, had not been put into my box until after I had gone out. Not wishing to ruin any chance that offered, I determined to go down to Birchin Lane next morning, call on Mr. H. C. Leddenham, whoever he might be, and explain my non-appearance of the previous afternoon. And towards noon I went. Then came another and more mystifying surprise. I was not particularly well acquainted with the City, but it did not take me very long to make myself assured of one undoubted fact—there was no such number as 327A in Birchin Lane ! I went up one side and down another : to make assurance doubly sure I asked a postman for information. He looked at me half pityingly.

“ Ain’t such a number, sir ! ” he said.
“ Is it 27 ? ”

“ No ! ” said I, and pulled out the typewritten letter. “ There it is !—327A.”

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"Well—it don't exist, sir," he remarked.
"Ain't—nowhere in the street!"

"Do you know anything of that name?"
said I, pointing to the H. C. Leddenham
—which, like all the rest of the thing, was
typed.

"Leddenham?"

He shook his head and looked blank.

"No!—never heard it!" he answered.
"Not in this quarter, I'll go bail!"

"Is there another Birchin Lane about
here?" I inquired.

He looked at me with real pity that time.

"Another! There's no other Birchin Lane
in all London!" he said. "The one and
only this is, guv'nor!"

When he had gone on his way, I, too,
went on mine—back west. I saw through
things. *The letter had been sent to keep me
from going to Marton Hill that afternoon
so that Mr. Vandamarke would be unaccom-
panied when he walked down from the club-
house to the station!*

I deduced various things from that con-
clusion: some of them indeed, were obvious.
Whoever had written that letter knew that
Mr. Vandamarke and I, in spite of the

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disparity between our ages, had become something of companions, and that I was in the habit of walking with him to the station from the club-house. That seemed to argue that the writer was a man who was familiar with what went on at the golf club—possibly a member. For anything I knew to the contrary, he might be a man who knew Mr. Vandamarke and myself personally, knew us well : Mr. Vandamarke might even have shown him the two hundred thousand pound diamond. There were some hundred and fifty members of the Marton Hill Golf Club : there might be some black sheep amongst them. Anyhow, this much was certain—the whole thing was a carefully-concocted bluff. There was no 327A in Birchin Lane ; there was no such person as H. C. Leddenham ; the letter had been intended to keep me away from the golf club that particular afternoon, and its sender would have achieved its purpose if I had not altered my usual course and gone to Marton Hill in the morning before the letter arrived. I made a very careful toilet that evening—all because of Miss Vandamarke's photograph. I had not wondered that her

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father was so proud of her : if the portrait was a faithful one, she was one of the most charming and pretty girls I had ever seen. I went to Prince's Gate eager to see her in the flesh—very eager. But the first person I saw was Mr. Vandamarke himself, who happened to be in the hall when I was admitted. I got him aside and told him of my adventure with the mysterious letter. His eyes twinkled behind his gold spectacles, and he laughed grimly, yet with evident enjoyment.

“ Crafty dogs !—sly dogs—clever—clever ! ” he said, chuckling. “ That was meant to keep you away, Gregg, my lad !—they wanted to catch the old man all by himself ! Well, well !—but now, not a word about our adventures last night ! Nobody knows—not even my girl, nor my secretary. Mum is the word—at present. Come !—I'll take you to the ladies—only just come in, myself, and I must put on my purple and fine linen. This way ! ”

He led me into the drawing-room, where he introduced me formally to his daughter—whose name I then learnt to be Rosalie—and to his secretary, Mrs. Kennerley, and recommending me to their especial care,

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left us. Miss Vandamarke proved to be even prettier and more charming than her photograph; she also turned out to be vivacious, natural, and, I fancied, full of fun and high spirits; Mrs. Kennerley, a sharp-eyed, self-possessed, good-looking woman of thirty, struck me at once as being just the sort of person that Mr. Vandamarke would have as a business adjunct. She inspected me in one quick comprehensive glance, and evidently set me down as a very ordinary young man. But Miss Vandamarke eyed me over more leisurely, and ended her examination with a smile.

“ I’m surprised to find you so very youthful, and so very innocent—in appearance—Mr. Gregg,” she said sweetly. “ I fancied you—quite otherwise ! ”

“ Yes ?—and why ? ” I inquired.

“ Because you and my father kept such late hours last night,” she answered. “ Fancy, Mrs. Kennerley !—they didn’t come back from that golf club till well after eleven, and then they sat up gossiping till long after midnight ! Bad habits, I think—for elderly gentlemen as well as for—— ”

“ Mere boys, I suppose ? ” said I. “ Oh,

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well, I daresay Mrs. Kennerley would give me more years than you seem inclined to credit me with, Miss Vandamarke. I'm not——”

I paused there, seeing that Mrs. Kennerley, to whom I had turned, was not looking at me at all. Following her gaze, I saw that she was smiling at a man who had just entered the room. And I looked at him, too. It was only by a swift effort of will that I repressed a sharp exclamation of surprise. For there before me, without a doubt, was the face which I had seen, illumined by the lighted match, in the courtyard of the lonely house !

CHAPTER IV

THE CORNER TABLE

IT was fortunate for me that Rosalie Vandamarke, too, was looking at the man who had just come in and was walking slowly across the room towards where we were all grouped about the fire : it gave me further opportunity of carefully examining the newcomer. He was a tall, well-built man of apparently thirty-five to forty years of age, good-looking, carefully groomed, well dressed, and evidently very much at home in the Vandamarke establishment. He greeted the two ladies as if he and they were on terms of very intimate friendship and gave me the sort of half-careless, half-friendly nod that men of his age accord to younger men whom they still consider to be boys. Within a moment he was laughing and joking with Miss Vandamarke and Mrs. Kennerley : it was obvious

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that all three knew each other well. And for the time being I was glad to be out of it—I wanted to watch this man's face more carefully, though I had no doubt that my final impression was correct. He stood lounging against the mantelpiece for a few minutes after he came in; suddenly turning to Mrs. Kennerley, who sat in a low chair close by, the light from an electric lamp caught his features at a peculiar angle, lighting them up just as the match had lighted the face in the courtyard. And then . . . I was certain. This, without a shadow of a doubt, was the man I had seen through the barred window!

And now . . . what ought I to do?

Beyond the fact that the other guest had been introduced to me as Mr. Trafferdale, I knew nothing about him, of course. His name was unfamiliar. He looked to me like a financial man of some sort; the kind of man that you see by the score at any time between ten in the morning and four in the afternoon in Lombard Street and Bartholomew Lane. That he was an easy-mannered, accustomed man of the world

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I judged by his conversation and behaviour ; he was evidently of the type that knows how to be agreeable and amusing. But what were his relations to my host ? That question was soon answered. Mr. Vandamarke presently bustled in and greeted Trafferdale with a warmth that he could scarcely have exceeded had he been welcoming a favourite brother : it was plain to me that he and his guest were the closest of friends. But—this was the man I had seen in the courtyard, and therefore . . .

It was more than perplexing and distressing to go on beyond that last word : what inevitably followed it was painful, for Mr. Vandamarke was not the sort of man whom one cared to see tricked and deceived by a false friend. While I puzzled my brains as to what I ought to do, my host, Mrs. Kennerley, and Trafferdale, who, on Mr. Vandamarke's entrance, had begun some business discussion in terms which were lost on me, moved further away, still talking, across the big room, leaving me alone with Miss Vandamarke. I had dropped into a chair close by her own, and suddenly, with a meaning

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glance at the other three, she leaned towards me.

"Do you like that man?" she asked in a whisper. "Say!"

I looked at her in astonishment.

"Don't know him!" I answered. "This is the first time——"

She shook her head impatiently.

"You've never had your eyes off him for the last five minutes!" she exclaimed. "You don't! Do you?"

"Very well—I don't!" said I. "Is that explicit enough?"

"Quite!" she answered, with a satisfied nod. "I knew you didn't. Nor do I."

"Why?" I asked.

"Couldn't possibly tell you," she answered. "Case of instinctive antipathy, I suppose. I loathe him! If I seem agreeable and pleasant and all that to him, assure yourself it's all rot! Mere pretence—affected! It's because he's my father's big pal—in the City. I wish he'd stick there!"

"What is he in the City?" I inquired.

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"Oh, goodness, as if I knew!" she exclaimed. "Money! Lucky if those three talk anything else but money all the evening. Listen! I've put you close to myself at dinner—talk to me—never mind them!"

I gave her a keen look, and she met it confidently: we were both of about an age, and there is a freemasonry of youth which won't be gainsaid.

"Fed up in that line?" I suggested.

"When those three are together—yes!" she said. "I jumped for joy when I heard that you were coming to dinner! I'd never seen you, but——"

"Well—now that you have?" I asked. "Come?"

"Oh, you're quite a nice sort of boy!" she answered, with a smile. "There's a charm in youth, isn't there? I don't know many young people—here. Since we came to London, it's been—that sort of man! Money men—diamonds—stocks—shares—mines—railways—concessions—contracts—and Mrs. Kennerley!"

"Don't you like Mrs. Kennerley?" I asked. "Clever-looking woman!"

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"Oh, she's clever enough," she admitted. "But—she's all business, too. I want—something else!"

"What, for instance?" I asked.

"Well—life! We go to theatres, of course, and all that sort of thing, but"—she paused, and looked thoughtfully at me—"Have you any sisters?" she asked abruptly.

"No!" said I. "I've nobody. I'm an orphan, and I've neither sister nor brother—I haven't even a grandmother or a maiden aunt."

"Lonely!" she murmured sympathetically. "What do you do with yourself?"

"Loaf about and play golf," I answered. "That is—till I get a job. Nothing to do at present—since the war."

"Were you in the war?" she asked, her eyes opening wider. "You?"

"Three years of it," I said.

"A child like you!" she exclaimed. "Did—did you ever kill anybody?"

"Hope so!" I answered fervently. "Sorry if I didn't!"

"That's because you're English," she said.

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"Why are Englishmen never happy unless they're killing something?"

"I'm quite happy when I'm not killing anything," I retorted. "It was my job to kill in the war—duty!"

"That's another English fetish," she said. "Duty! But"—here she glanced me over inquisitively—"did—did you get wounded?"

"Twice!" said I. "Only just got over the last do." Then lest she should keep on that talk, I began catechising her. "Why do you refer to my being English?" I asked. "Aren't you?"

"I?" she answered. "Goodness me, no! I never saw England until last spring: I was born in South Africa. My father's Dutch and my mother was French. Queer mixture I must be, mustn't I?"

"A very interesting mixture!" I agreed. "But judging by results——"

Just then Mr. Vandamarke came towards us, rubbing his hands.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "I thought you two young people would get on!—youngsters soon find each other out—nice boy, Rosalie, isn't he?"

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"I fancy Mr. Gregg is not quite so youthful as he looks," replied his daughter. "Nor," she added in an aside to me, "so innocent and—ingenuous!"

Before I could reply dinner was announced. Things turned out as my young hostess had predicted. At their end of the table, Mr. Vandamarke and his two elder guests talked of business matters; at ours, we chatted of—other things, anything. But I contrived to keep both eyes and ears open on the other three, and I speedily assured myself of two facts—one that Mr. Vandamarke and Trafferdale were very close friends and evidently intimately connected in financial concerns; the other, that Mrs. Kennerley was a sort of right-hand-man to our host, and probably knew as much about his affairs as he did himself. And all through, in spite of my pleasant tête-à-tête with Rosalie, who was a very charming and lively damsel when one got to know her, I was conscious of a horrible feeling of mental suffocation. That Trafferdale was the man I had seen in the courtyard of that mysterious house, and was therefore mixed up with the men who had robbed our host of his two hundred thousand

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pound diamond—possibly the originator and contriver of the whole thing—I was certain; more and more certain the more I saw of him. And yet, there was poor innocent old Vandamarke, making much of him, hobnobbing with him—all unsuspecting! It made my blood boil—and all the more fiercely because I did not know what to do.

But in the end I got an inspiration. Perhaps I should not have acted upon it if I had thought of the old saying and counted twenty before yielding to its impulse. I got it in this way—our host and his elder guest, the ladies gone, settled down to a decanter of port; I, on the plea of a poor head for that sort of thing, excused myself, and repaired to the drawing-room. And there I found Mrs. Kennerley—alone. Without pausing to reflect—and yet it was well, in the long run, that I had no time for reflection!—I dropped into a chair at her side.

“Mrs. Kennerley!” I said, with a glance at the door which was meant to convey to her that what I said was said in confidence. “You’re a business woman, aren’t you?”

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She gave me an amused smile and laughed.

"Well, I think I may say I am, Mr. Gregg!" she replied.

"A smart, clever business woman, I'm sure?" I insinuated.

"I daresay there are people who would say I am!" she asserted, with another laugh.

"But—what's the matter?"

I edged my chair closer to hers—with a second glance at the door. "I want your advice, Mrs. Kennerley," I answered. "On a matter of the utmost importance! Can you give me half-an-hour to-morrow?—alone?—anywhere?"

Her look of amusement gave place to one of surprise, but she was ready enough to reply.

"Yes, I can!" she said. "Any time?"

"Any time will do for me," I answered. "Name your own time—and place."

She hesitated a moment, then nodded at the windows.

"You know Alexandra Gate, outside there?" she said. "Very well—meet me there at 12.30 noon, to-morrow. I always

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go for half-an-hour's walk in the Row about that time. Will that do? "

I had just time to thank her and to say that it would do very well before Rosalie Vandamarke came into the room. Soon afterwards, her father and Trafferdale appeared; Mr. Vandamarke had just bought what he declared to be the very latest thing in gramophones; for an hour he insisted on having this atrocity grind out a selection of what he fondly believed to be music: I was thankful when that part of the proceedings came to an end. Soon afterwards, I left—and went home meditating on my discovery. That Trafferdale, posing as Vandamarke's bosom friend, was at the bottom of the conspiracy to rob him of his diamond I was certain; the painful and difficult business was the revealing of the truth to Vandamarke himself. But I fancied that Mrs. Kennerley was just the woman to tackle that part of the business; I had seen enough to convince me that the old gentleman trusted her implicitly in everything and had a great admiration for her ability: I would confide in Mrs. Kennerley.

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Soon after noon next day I was at Alexandra Gate ; and at half-past twelve I saw Mrs. Kennerley coming towards me. She looked very smart, very alert ; just the sort of woman to undertake delicate and diplomatic business, and I congratulated myself on my astuteness in enlisting her services. We turned towards the less frequented parts of Kensington Gardens ; it was a warm, sunny morning and we sat down.

“ Now ! ” said Mrs. Kennerley. “ And this matter of the utmost importance ? ”

I looked my very gravest.

“ Mrs. Kennerley,” I began, “ you are Mr. Vandamarke’s private secretary ? ”

“ I am ! ” said she.

“ And doubtless in his confidence ? ”

“ In most things — business things — yes ! ”

“ Do you know—I’m putting all my cards on the table, out of concern for Mr. Vandamarke !—do you know of his extremely valuable diamond ? ”

“ The Vandamarke Diamond ?—Yes ! ”

“ Do you know that he’s—lost it ? ”

She turned on me with a look which I found it hard to understand. It was not

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a look of surprise, nor did it show that she was incredulous ; it seemed, somehow, as if she were suddenly asking herself how much I knew concerning the matter I had mentioned.

“ Lost it ? ” she exclaimed. “ Impossible ! ”

“ Not at all ! ” said I. “ I should say the wonder is that he hasn’t lost it before. But—hasn’t he told you of this ? ”

“ He ? No ! ” she declared. “ Certainly not ! ”

“ Then I tell you—for his sake,” I continued. “ He needs—protection. I tell you in confidence, of course, Mrs. Kennerley—this is strictly between ourselves.”

“ Oh, of course, Mr. Gregg ! ” she murmured. “ But that diamond ! Lost ! ”

“ To be plain, he was robbed of it, night before last,” said I. “ I’ll tell you the story—it’s short enough. He and I, walking from our club-house at Marton Hill golf links, to the station, were held up by three masked men, armed with revolvers, who forced us into a powerful car and carried us off for miles to a lonely house. There they got Mr. Vandamarke’s diamond out of

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him ; carried us off again, and after a good hour's run, set us down outside Basingstoke. A clever plant all through, Mrs. Kennerley—and he hasn't told you of it ? ”

“ Not one word ! ” she answered. “ Not one syllable has he breathed of it ! ”

“ And I ought not to have breathed syllable or word,” said I. “ I promised him I wouldn't. But—I just had to ! To—you ! ”

“ Why ? ” she demanded.

“ I'll tell you. I think I've got a pretty fair old faculty of observation—picked it up, no doubt, during my war experiences—anyway, I keep my eyes open. Well, I saw two things during this affair the other night. For one—I noticed that the man who drove the car had a curiously twisted finger—he'd had a bullet through his knuckle, I'll swear ! But the other—much more important. While Mr. Vandamarke was out of the room in which they'd put us—they called him into another—I looked out of the window into a courtyard in front. There was a man walking up and down there. He struck a match to light his cigar, and for

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the better part of a minute, Mrs. Kennerley, I'd a full, good, close view of his face. Mrs. Kennerley!—I saw that face again last night!"

"Where?" she asked, turning on me with her eyes—very fine eyes—full open, as if she were fascinated. "In London?"

"In London!" I laughed. "Yes—close by here. Mrs. Kennerley!—the man I saw in the courtyard was Mr. Trafferdale!—our fellow-guest of last night! That's as dead certain as it is that that horrible outrage on Art which we see yonder is the Albert Memorial!" I turned from pointing at the gilded points of one of my pet aversions to look at her. She was gazing at me with the same sort of look which she had given me before, but it was accentuated. I nodded at her.

"Fact, Mrs. Kennerley!" I said, with emphasis.

Eventually she found her tongue.

"Mr. Trafferdale?" she said in a low voice. "Impossible! He's one of Mr. Vandamarke's most intimate friends—in private life as well as in business."

"Don't care what he is!" said I, doggedly.

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"He's the man! I knew his face as soon as he walked into that drawing-room last night. Friend or no friend, he is the man who was smoking his cigar outside that house while his friends inside were relieving Mr. Vandamarke of his two hundred thousand pound diamond! And—what's to be done?"

"How do you mean—what's to be done?" she asked.

"That's what I wanted to ask your advice about," I explained. "Am I to go straight to Mr. Vandamarke and tell him what I've told you? I told him about the man with the twisted finger, and about the face in the courtyard—am I now to tell him that the face was that of his friend Trafferdale?"

"He wouldn't believe it!" she said. "He and Trafferdale——"

"It's a thing that could probably be proved, Mrs. Kennerley," I said. "If Trafferdale were requested to explain his movements that evening——"

"What did Mr. Vandamarke ask you to do?" she inquired, interrupting me. "To say nothing at present? Very well—if I

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were you, Mr. Gregg, I should do what he asked. You can rely on me to respect your confidence of this morning. But let me tell you something—Mr. Vandamarke is what South Africans call a very slim man! I don't mean that he's either crafty or unscrupulous, but he's the most astute man I ever knew as regards looking after his own affairs and interests, and—and I should just wait, if I were you, to see what his next move is. You may be sure of this—Mr. Vandamarke is up to some move! The quieter, the more silent he is, the more he's at work—under the surface. You take my advice—do nothing; say nothing; wait!”

We parted. But I was to see Mrs. Kennerley again that day, though at an advanced period of it. I had just then come into a comfortable legacy, and to give myself a treat, I went to dine that night at Mocatti's. Everybody who knows Mocatti's knows that in that eminently fashionable restaurant there is a balcony running round the principal salon—you can dine on the balcony and look down on the gay scene below. I dined on the balcony, and occasionally

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looked down—and I was half-way through my dinner when, at a corner table, immediately beneath me, I caught sight of Mrs. Kennerley, in full rig, dining *à deux* with . . . Trafferdale !

CHAPTER V

THE DOWN STREET FLAT

BY that time I was getting somewhat accustomed to being taken aback. Consequently, as soon as I had spotted Mrs. Kennerley and Trafferdale, I withdrew my head from the balcony rail behind which I sat and reflected a while on this new situation. I regarded it from several points of view. It might be perfectly innocent. There was no reason whatever why Mrs. Kennerley and Mr. Trafferdale should not dine together at Mocatti's or at any other fashionable resort. I had seen enough of them the night before to know that they were well acquainted with each other. Rosalie Vandamarke had informed me that Mrs. Kennerley was a widow: perhaps she and Trafferdale were engaged to each other or going to be. But knowing what I did about Trafferdale, and bearing

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in mind what I had told Mrs. Kennerley only a few hours previously in Kensington Gardens, I felt uneasy and doubtful. Would she tell Trafferdale—had she told Trafferdale—what I had told her? In that case it would be like warning a thief that his little game was laid bare and justice on his track. And somehow I was not quite comfortable in my mind about the lady. True, I had made her my confidante—but I wasn't exactly sure, the thing being done, if I had been wise in entrusting the secret to her. And there she was, sitting beneath me at Mocatti's, with the very man whom I had denounced!

After a while, and as unobtrusively as possible, I took another surreptitious peep at the couple below. They were going by easy stages through their dinner, and were evidently on the very best terms with each other and the world in general. Also they were far too much absorbed in each other's conversation to look about them; they certainly never looked up. And after that I kept looking down, for I was resolved that when they quitted Mocatti's, I, too, would quit and find out where they went: I wanted

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to know more. They were in no hurry : when it got to the coffee and liqueur stage, they lighted cigarettes and appeared to be prepared to stay where they were for some time. They had got their chairs and their heads very close together by then, and their talk was evidently confidential. And suddenly in the midst of it, Trafferdale put his hand in his trousers pocket, drew out what looked like a purse or small case, and produced from it something which under cover of the edge of the table he showed in the palm of his hand to his companion. Whoever had chanced to be watching from round about him, on the same level, could not have seen anything, but I, from my elevation, could see clearly. And from the object in the hollowed hand I saw a spark of light flash sharply, and had no doubt then that he was showing Mrs. Kennerley the stolen diamond.

His hand went back to his pocket : they both laughed, as if what had just taken place afforded them both amusement and satisfaction. Presently, they showed signs of moving : Trafferdale motioned to his waiter and began settling his bill. So I

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called for mine, and kept a sharp eye on the two below as soon as I was ready to go.

They rose at last: so did I. Warily making my way to the lower floor, I watched them from one or two convenient vantage points, and at last followed them into the street. To my intense satisfaction, instead of calling for a cab, they went off on foot—arm-in-arm

I had got the amateur-detective fever on me by that time, and had made up my mind to follow them wherever they went, for I was fully convinced that Trafferdale had the Vandamarke diamond on him and that Mrs. Kennerley was one of his accomplices. Turning up the collar of my overcoat, muffling the lower part of my face in my silk neckerchief, and drawing my soft hat well over my brows I moved after my quarry. They were easy to track, for Trafferdale was a tall man, and Mrs. Kennerley wore an unusually conspicuous cloak over her dinner dress. But I had not far to follow.

Mocatti's, as every one knows, is within a stone's throw of Piccadilly Circus; they crossed the Circus, with me ten yards in

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their rear, and turned into the London Pavilion. So did I, keeping in the background while Trafferdale bought two seats in the best part of the house. I, too, bought a similar seat, and I went into the auditorium after them—but only long enough to assure myself that they were there, and of their exact location. Then I went out again into the entrance and had a look at the bill. There was a big star turn on that night; I judged that it would be at about a quarter-past-ten o'clock. Looking at my watch, I found that it was then just twenty minutes past nine. I went straight into the street, got the first taxi-cab I saw empty, and bade its driver go as quickly as possible to Prince's Gate.

I was going to tell Mr. Vandamarke—to tell him everything. It seemed to me that he was being betrayed in the house of his friends, was the victim of an abominable plot. Anyway, without more delay, he should know all that I knew, and at once. Then my conscience would be clear and he could act as he thought best. But when I rang the bell at the Vandamarke mansion, and the solemn butler himself responded

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to my summons I got a shock. Mr. Vandamarke was not at home.

"Went away this afternoon, sir," said the butler, condescending to recognise me as a guest of the previous evening. "Out of town, I fancy, sir. But," he added, with a welcome inflection of voice. "Miss Vandamarke is at home."

There was a note of interrogation in the last words, and I hastened to ask him to tell Miss Vandamarke that I was there. Within two minutes he had me into the Dutch room whereto Mr. Vandamarke had conducted me on our return from Basingstoke; there, coiled up in a big chair, with a book in her lap, sat Rosalie. But as I entered she jumped up, staring at me. Her lips parted, and her cheek flushed a little.

"Is—is anything the matter?" she demanded. "You look—upset!"

"No wonder!" said I. "But tell me!—your father is away?"

"Yes," she replied. "Gone to Birmingham—business."

"When will he be back?" I asked. "To-night?"

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"No!" she said, still showing surprise. "Perhaps to-morrow evening. What is it?"

I looked at her fixedly.

"The very devil!" said I. "That's what it is! Well, there's nothing else for it—I'll have to tell you!"

"Tell me what?" she asked. "You're—very mysterious!"

"Mysterious!" I exclaimed. "Exactly! Mysterious is the very word. Sit down and listen."

She sat down. I pulled a chair close to hers, and as quickly and briefly as possible, told her everything that had happened, from the kidnapping in the lane at Marton Hill to the tracing of Trafferdale and Mrs. Kennerley to the Pavilion. She was an admirable listener; she never interrupted, and she acknowledged every point with an intelligent nod.

"There it is!—and now what's to be done?" I concluded. "Your father is away—that man Trafferdale is undoubtedly in possession of the diamond—he may clear out with it—and there's two hundred thousand pounds gone!"

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She considered matters—and me—for a minute.

"They're still at that music-hall?" she asked.

"I left them there twenty minutes ago, and I should say they'll stay there for another hour, anyway," said I. "There's a big star turn on at 10.15—they'll be sure to stop for that."

"What was your notion?" she asked.

"I thought your father, having heard what I had to tell, would perhaps have gone back with me," I answered. "The thing seems to be—to confront those two at once. I'm certain Trafferdale has the diamond on him. I think your father would have gone."

She suddenly rose from her chair.

"Very well, then, I'll go!" she said determinedly. "I believe Trafferdale's a bad lot, and I've always had a sneaking conviction that Mrs. Kennerley was a cat! After what you've said, I'll tackle them!"

"With me in attendance, of course," said I. "Well—there's a taxi outside: I kept it in case it was wanted. But—hadn't you better change your dress? The notion is to be as—as inconspicuous as possible."

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She glanced down at her frock. She had a natural taste for bright colour, and her dinner gown was not of the sort that would have passed unnoticed.

"How long can you give me?" she asked.

"At the outside—ten minutes," said I firmly. "That means ten minutes."

She laughed and hastened out of the room. Within the allotted time she was back again, smart enough, it is true, but now in a grey ulster coat that wrapped her from top to toe, and wearing a veil. She posed for a second in the doorway.

"That suit your lordship?" she asked demurely. "Would anybody know me?"

"Excellent!" said I. "Now come on!"

Going out to the cab, which we did at once without leaving any word with the servants, an idea struck me, and I told the driver to go round by Jermyn Street and stop at my number.

"What's that for?" asked Rosalie as we set off. "I thought you were in a hurry to get to this music-hall?"

"We don't know what may happen, nor amongst what company we may get," I replied. "And I think it well to go armed—

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I'm going to call at my rooms for my old service pistol."

"Armed!" she exclaimed. "You don't anticipate——"

"We won't anticipate anything," said I. "Let's hope that our wits will be more useful than force. But to be forewarned is to be forearmed—and there might be occasion for letting anybody see that we're not to be bullied."

"What do you propose to do?" she asked.

"To see, first, where these two go when they leave the Pavilion," I replied. "And then, to do what I think your father would do if he were here."

"And that is——?" she said.

"To request delivery of that diamond!" said I. "And that, I think, will be your share of the business—as his representative. Do you think you could tackle this chap Trafferdale in that way?"

"Wait and see!" she retorted. "If you're certain that he has it——"

"I'm certain that he has a diamond on him—and putting two and two together, whose should it be but your father's?" I

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said. "Anyway, I'm up to telling Trafferdale to his face that he's the man whom I saw smoking in that courtyard!—that's an absolute certainty! This is a plot, a conspiracy, a——"

"Engineered by Mrs. Kennerley, of course," she murmured. "Never liked or trusted her! You don't know—but it was Trafferdale who recommended her to my father."

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "That explains a lot! She's a tool, a creature of his. And who introduced Trafferdale?"

"Don't know!—nobody, I should think," she replied. "I suppose my father just picked him up in the City. We knew nobody when we came to England."

"Lambs!—thrown amongst wolves!" I remarked, cynically sympathetic. "Innocents!"

"I don't think you'll find me very lamb-like nor innocent," she murmured. "I'm not a fool, anyway."

"Your father has been described to me as one of the most astute men that ever walked!" I observed.

"Well, and so he is!" she said, defiantly. "Who says he isn't? You?"

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"Don't call it very astute business to carry a diamond worth a couple of hundred thousand pounds in one's waistcoat pocket," I remarked, "nor to show it to all and sundry! Do you?"

"I don't admit the all and sundry," she retorted. "But I know my father to be a sharp pointed proposition. Had that character all his life, anyhow!"

"Well, now's the opportunity for you to show that you're a chip of the old block!" said I, as the cab pulled up in Jermyn Street. "One minute—while I get my gun!"

I dashed up to my rooms, got the old service automatic, slipped a cartridge or two into it, and turned to leave. Some instinct prompted me to look into my letter-box; there lay a telegram. I tore open the envelope, glanced at the contents, and hurried back to Rosalie.

"Talking of your father," I said, as I resumed my seat at her side, "I've just found a wire from him—sent from Birmingham. Short and precise—I can repeat it. 'Meet me Corlands, St. Martin's Lane, to-morrow afternoon about 2.30.' Who are Corlands?"

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"Don't know—never heard their name before," she answered. "But—that's something to do with this business."

"You think so?" I said.

"Sure! And I think his visit to Birmingham has also something to do with it," she said. "As I remarked—previously—my father is——"

"Astute!" said I. "Well, here we are at the Pavilion, and now it's our turn to be all that and a bit more. Remember!—we're to see and we're not to be seen."

It was then ten minutes past ten: the big star turn was due in five minutes. I ushered Rosalie into the auditorium, and purposely edged a way into a convenient corner from which we could see Trafferdale and his companion. There they were, just as I had confidently anticipated; Trafferdale, I was sure, was just the sort of man to enjoy music-hall performances and to be keen about seeing a star. I pointed him and Mrs. Kennerley out.

"You don't mind standing?" I whispered. "From here we can see them leave. When they do, trust me to keep them in sight, and you stick close to me."

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She nodded, then looked round her wonderingly, and leaning nearer to me whispered,

"I've never been in a place of this sort before!" she said. "Theatres, of course, no end—but never in a music-hall. If you're going to watch those two, perhaps I can——"

"Just so!" I agreed. "You amuse yourself with what's going on, and I'll keep an eye on the game! They won't move yet—not until this big turn's over, anyway. So that we shan't lose each other, put your arm in mine. That's the approved fashion when one's standing."

She laughed and slipped her hand in the crook of my arm. It was a slender but firm little hand. I could feel its warmth through my coat. And twenty minutes later, when the star had positively bowed herself off for the last time, I gave it an involuntary squeeze. Trafferdale and his companion were on the move.

"Now for it!" said I. "This is the stiff part of the business. The most critical thing will be if they go off in a cab! However . . ."

I kept my eye on Trafferdale's tall figure

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as he led the way out. Fortunately, a lot of people left at the end of the big turn, and it was an easy matter for Rosalie and myself to follow our quarry unobserved. And to my great relief Trafferdale and Mrs. Kennerley, once outside the hall, showed no inclination to ride wherever they were going. She put her arm in his ; they began to thread their way across Piccadilly Circus : so did we, well in their rear.

“ Look here ! ” said I, once more drawing Rosalie’s arm within mine. “ Those two are going to walk. Now, do you know where Mrs. Kennerley lives ? ”

“ Her address ? Yes—she has a flat in Wells Street. Isn’t that off Oxford Street ? ” she asked.

“ It is—and they aren’t going that way,” I answered, as Trafferdale and his companion made west. “ They’re going along Piccadilly. Do you know where Trafferdale lives ? ”

“ Yes, I know that, too, because I’ve sent cards there,” she replied. “ He lives in Down Street—he’s got a flat, I think.”

“ Then, probably, that’s where they’re going,” I said. “ And in that case it will

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be plain sailing—until we run them to earth. There they go!—and all we've got to do is to walk behind at a respectful distance. But, if they go into Trafferdale's flat, what are we to do then? As your father's representative, it's up to you to decide."

She hesitated for a moment; then she spoke with decision.

"I think my duty's plain!" she said. "It's to walk in and ask Mr. Trafferdale for an explanation!"

"Aye!—but on what grounds?" I suggested. "He'll want some!"

"First, that you saw him outside the house to which you and my father were carried off," she answered. "Second, that from what you've seen to-night, you believe him to be in possession of the missing diamond. Surely that's enough!"

"Quite!" said I. "Is that settled, then? You'll do that?"

"I'll do it!" she replied firmly. "I don't care for Trafferdale, nor for Mrs. Kennerley either. You think she'll be there?"

"We shall soon see," I answered. "Down Street is not far off."

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We followed Trafferdale and Mrs. Kennerley to the entrance to Down Street. They turned into it, and into the lighted hall of a mansion of flats about half-way up. After a minute or two, we too, walked into that hall. There was a board there, with names on it : Trafferdale's flat, it appeared, was on the first floor. In silence we walked up the stair, and finding his name on a door, rang the bell.

Trafferdale himself opened the door. He was still in his hat, overcoat, and muffler. He started unmistakeably at sight of us, but before he could speak, Rosalie had spoken.

" Mr. Trafferdale ! " she said in a low voice, " my father being away, I'm here—in his place. I want to speak to you—about his diamond ! Do you understand ? "

He was sharp-witted enough to make pretence that he didn't. He stared—as if amazed.

" Your father's—diamond ! " he exclaimed. " I—but here, come in !—come into this room ! "

There was a square, dimly-lighted hall inside ; he led us across it, opened a door,

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switched on a light, and showed us into a sitting-room.

“ Half-a-minute, while I take off my coat,” he muttered. “ I—really—no idea, you know—— ”

Then he went out, closing the door upon us. And . . . *he locked it !*

CHAPTER VI

KEYHOLE AND INNER ROOM

THE sharp turning of that key acted on Rosalie Vandamarke and myself as the sudden pulling of invisible wires acts on marionettes. We slewed round on each other as if moved by a controlling power against which we could not contend : I felt my eyes widen and my lips part, and out of sheer disgust at my lack of foresight I lost my tongue. But her's was ready enough.

“ Locked in ! ” she exclaimed. “ Trapped ! ”

I glanced round. It was a smallish room, some twelve or fourteen feet square, furnished like a dining-room, plainly but comfortably. But I gave no more than a glance at all that : I was looking for means of egress. There was a window at the further end, and a second door in the right hand recess by the fireplace. I made for that first ;

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it was locked as I approached it—I heard the click of the key, unmistakably. I jumped for the window at that and saw at once there was no chance of escape that way—it was a double window, and the inner sashes were locked in the centre, with no key visible; as far as I could make out all to be seen outside was a blank brick wall, some half-dozen yards away. I turned back to Rosalie with a bitter laugh.

“ You can set me down for a fool ! ” said I. “ And Trafferdale isn’t one ! He’s done me ! He sized things up at once !—and here we are ! ”

“ I suppose I’m as big a fool as you are,” she answered. “ But—I never thought ! Certainly not of anything like this. He was pretty sharp, though !—a good hand at realising a situation ! ”

“ Sharp ! ” I exclaimed. “ A confounded lot too sharp ! Of course, he saw everything at a glance—knew what we’d come for—knew everything. That she-cat must have told him all I told her in Kensington Gardens, and he’d speedily put two and two together when he found us at his door. Write me down an ass ! ”

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"All the same," she said, "I don't see what else we could have done. But the thing is—what's to be done now?"

"Might as well ask that of a chap who's just been sentenced to six months and stuck in his cell!" said I, sarcastically. "We're at our gaoler's mercy. There's no doubt that I'm a perfect fool! Here I am—with a pistol in my pocket!"

"What good's that?" she demanded.

"I ought to have made some show of it when Trafferdale opened the door," said I.

"I'm glad you didn't, then," she said. "They can't keep us here for ever!"

"They can keep us here just as long as they like," I said. "The doors are stout, and safely locked; so is the window, and if we broke it there seems to be nothing but a blank wall opposite. No!—we're caged."

But I began to hunt about. There must be a bell somewhere—possibly it would communicate with a caretaker in the basement.

But there wasn't a bell—at least, all the bell that I could find was an ornamental brass affair, a hand-bell, that stood amongst

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other knick-knacks on the mantelpiece ; a tinkling thing, the sound of which might penetrate to the adjoining rooms but would certainly not be heard beyond them. Yet, on once more examining the door by which we had entered, I made a discovery. The keyhole was an unusually large one ; moreover, it was set in the panels at a rather higher point than is generally done ; Trafferdale, in locking us in, had turned the key quite clear of the hole, and I found that I could see into and over a good part of the entrance hall.

"Hooray!" I exclaimed. "I can see through this keyhole!"

Rosalie looked at me as if in amused wonder at my enthusiasm.

"And what good will that do?" she asked.

"Possibly a lot!" said I. "I can, at any rate, keep an eye on the hall. If those two quit——"

"Why should they quit?" she interrupted.

"My notion is that they will quit," I answered firmly. "Of course they will! They've locked us up so that they can clear

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out—with the diamond! Don't you see? —as soon as ever Trafferdale saw our ingenuous, youthful countenances at the door, and heard your plain-spoken demand, he saw that the game was all up, that we knew more than we ought to know, and he showed us in here, and turned the key on us, so that we should be safe while he and Mrs. Kennerley hooked it! That's it—and—— ”

A sudden sharp ringing of an electric bell in the hall stopped my eloquence and made us both jump. With a wave of the hand to Rosalie, I tip-toed to the door and glued my right eye to the highly convenient key-hole. I could see a lot of the hall—the outer door, and hall-table and hat-stand, part of a door on the right—and now I saw Trafferdale coming out of that door. He walked to the outer entrance and laid his hand on the latch.

“ There's a man come in ! ” I whispered to Rosalie, now hovering excited and eager at my side. “ A tall, clean-shaven man—evening dress. He's got a newspaper. He's showing something in it to Trafferdale. Trafferdale's reading it. They're exchanging looks over it, whatever it is. Trafferdale's

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shut the front door. The man's taking off his hat and coat. Now they're going into another room—they've gone!"

I stood up and looked at her. She shook her head.

"That doesn't help us at all!" she remarked. "I wish we were out of this place. I'm hungry!"

I turned to a small sideboard that stood on one side of the room. There was a glass jar there, full of biscuits, and a couple of dishes of fruit—oranges, bananas, grapes. I transferred them to the table in the centre.

"As we're Trafferdale's unwilling guests, we'll help ourselves to Trafferdale's grub," I said. "I don't suppose he's poisoned any of these things. Wade in!—while I see if there's anything to drink knocking round."

There was plenty to drink in a cellaret in that sideboard—whisky, brandy, port, sherry, claret. I rummaged about, found a corkscrew and glasses, and opened a bottle of claret, as being the lightest stuff. And when I had poured out a glass for Rosalie and swallowed one myself I went back to the keyhole. Behind me I heard my fellow captive steadily munching the biscuits.

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“ What shall you do if Trafferdale comes ? ” she asked suddenly.

“ Let him look down the barrel of my little gun ! ” said I. “ That’ll cool him ! ”

“ You wouldn’t shoot him ? ” she suggested.

“ With pleasure !—if he’s ugly,” I replied. “ But a pistol is a mighty handy thing for making bad men good. I only wish I’d had mine in my hand when we first appeared on this scene ! ”

“ Perhaps he might have had one, too,” she said.

“ Quite likely !—but I shouldn’t have given him time to handle it,” said I. “ However, that’s all in the past—I wonder what that man was after ? Shouldn’t wonder if he’s one of the gang that kidnapped me and your honoured parent ! ”

“ I’m not so hungry now,” she remarked. “ Shall I watch ? ”

“ I think not,” said I. “ This is a man’s job. Now, if something would only happen—— ”

But quite half-an-hour went by before I saw anything more. Then, suddenly, Trafferdale emerged from the door on the right, and I began to whisper his movements.

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“Trafferdale again!” I said. “By himself. He’s taking down a big travelling coat from the stand in the hall. Now he’s—good lord! he’s turned out the light—the hall’s in darkness!”

But there was a crack of light at the door from which Trafferdale had emerged. Presently, however, his tall figure obscured it; he went within the room from which it came; the door closed. Then all was silent—and black.

That puzzled me. Why had Trafferdale turned out the light in that hall after taking down a coat which, presumably, he meant to use? And what was the other man doing?—to my certain knowledge he was still somewhere in the flat. I remained at the keyhole a while, listening. I heard nothing, nor could I hear anything when I went over to the other door. There was no sound perceptible anywhere; not even a subdued murmur of voices. Suddenly Rosalie yawned—it was the frank, unabashed yawn of sheer sleepiness.

“How long do you think they’ll keep us here?” she asked. “I’m awfully sleepy!”

“I should say we’re caged till morning,”

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said I. "We can't possibly release ourselves. Why not lie down on that sofa? I'll keep watch—I shan't sleep, I can assure you! Very likely — good heavens, what's that?"

But I knew well enough what the sound was that made us both jump. It was the loud bang of a door.

"They're off!" I exclaimed. "That was the outer door closing. We're locked up for the night. That's certain. It's as I thought it would be. They're away with the diamond!"

"But how do you know it'll only be for the night?" she asked. "If they've run away, we might be kept here for days and days—to starve to death!"

"No!" I said, reassuringly. "There's sure to be somebody who attends to these flats—an old woman who comes to do things—make beds and so on—and who'll turn up in the morning. But till then I'm afraid we're trapped securely. Why not have some sleep on that sofa?"

"And—you?" she asked.

"Oh, I'll have a smoke," I said. "I shan't sleep. It's one o'clock—perhaps at

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seven or eight somebody will come. You take my advice."

She took it. It was a good, roomy sofa, with a rug and plenty of cushions. Between us we made it comfortable, and in ten minutes Rosalie was fast asleep on it. As for me, I lighted my pipe and getting into an easy chair, reflected. I had plenty of things to reflect on. For I was by no means certain that anybody would come in the morning, and I saw no way of effecting our release by any effort of mine. That Trafferdale, Mrs. Kennerley, and the strange man had all departed together, I felt sure—they wanted so many hours' start—which, when I came to think of it, was another reason why we should be imprisoned much longer than I had at first anticipated.

The night wore away, very, very slowly. In spite of myself, I, too, began to nod at last, and finally I fell asleep. It was an uneasy sleep, troubled by queer dreams, but it must have become sounder towards morning, for I was certainly hard and fast the second before I suddenly woke. I started up, staring around me, to find Rosalie half-risen from her sofa, gazing towards the door.

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Then I realised that I had heard some sound, and that she, too, had been roused by it.

“What is it?” I whispered. “Did you hear anything?”

She nodded in the direction of the hall.

“The door in the hall!” she said. “Heard it bang. Somebody’s come in!”

I rose to my feet: so did she. We stood waiting, our faces turned to the door. Two or three minutes passed; then the handle was turned. And at that I drew my pistol. Rosalie made a little protesting sound.

“All right!” I murmured. “No danger!—but whoever comes in will look down this. You keep back a bit.”

The key grated in the lock; very slowly the door was opened. Then I had hard work to repress an exclamation of surprise. A hand appeared round the edge of the door, pushing it open—a hand the little finger of which was curiously twisted and scarred. And at sight of it, I raised my pistol to a level at which a face would show.

The face came—looking round the edge of the door. It was the face of a lantern-jawed, pallid-complexioned man, with a pair

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of dark, cavernous eyes. I was only a couple of feet from it by that time, and I poked the pistol straight at the fellow's nose. He let out a yell that did credit to his lungs, turned, made one dash across the hall, tore open the outer door, and went headlong down the stairs outside: I, rushing after him, was just in time to see him disappear at the foot. I heard a door bang down there; evidently, he had fled into the street.

I turned to find Rosalie confronting me from the outer door of the flat.

"Gone?" she asked.

"And in a great hurry!" said I. "I say!—that was one of the three men who did the kidnapping!"

"Are you sure?" she asked, half-incredulously.

"Dead certain!—I knew him," I answered. "He's the chap of the twisted finger—result of a wound. Oh, I knew him! And he knew me. I guess he's a man who comes here as valet to Trafferdale. That's about it. Nice surprise for him to find us here!"

"Don't let's stop any longer," she said. "We're free—let's go."

"Half a minute," said I. "I'm going

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to look round this flat. Here's the room they were in last night—let's see if there's anything there that may give us a clue."

The door of that room was still half way open. We went in. There were certainly signs of a preparation for flight. On the table stood a supper-tray, the various contents of which had been little touched; there, too, were spirits and wine and glasses; on the chairs were articles of clothing; it looked as if Trafferdale had packed a bag. There was a bedroom beyond—drawers and cabinets were open there, and a man's evening clothes were thrown, anyhow, across the bed. But all the rooms were deserted, and a superficial examination of them gave me no clue as to where their late occupant had gone.

I was just about to lead Rosalie out when, in an easy chair in that room, I caught sight of a newspaper, carelessly thrown aside. There was a blue pencil mark on it—I remembered then that when Trafferdale admitted the other man during the night, the visitor had immediately drawn his attention to something in a paper which he carried in his hand. And so I picked up this paper

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and turned straight to the blue mark. The next instant I let out a gasp of astonishment.

“Here’s what sent Trafferdale and his associates on their travels!” I exclaimed. “Look!—there’s your father’s hand in that! Read!” I spread the paper on a vacant space on the littered table; together we bent over the passage—an advertisement—marked in blue pencil.

“£5,000 REWARD.—Stolen from the person, in a country house to which its owner was forcibly carried by a gang of masked men on Monday evening last, a LARGE DIAMOND. The above reward will be paid by Messrs. Corland & Co., Assessors, 983, St. Martin’s Lane, to anyone returning the said diamond, or giving information which will lead to its recovery, or to the identification and arrest of the members of the above-mentioned gang.”

We looked at each other. The same thought occurred to us—things were moving.

“Yes!—that’s father’s doing,” she said.

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“And—Corlands? Isn’t that the place where you were to meet him?”

“It is!” said I. “This afternoon. But—we mustn’t wait until then. Trafferdale and his precious companions have got several hours’ start of us. We must go there at once and tell what we know.”

“I want to go home,” declared Rosalie. “The servants will be ringing up the police if I don’t. Come home with me to breakfast—then we’ll go to Corlands—together.”

I reflected that Corlands would probably not be open until ten o’clock and that it was now not yet eight. We hurried out of Trafferdale’s flat, leaving it to take care of itself, and getting a cab in Piccadilly drove off to Prince’s Gate. Leaving Rosalie to give what explanation she liked to the astonished domestics, I asked the butler to get me all the newspapers of the previous evening and of that morning: with a bundle of these I retreated to Mr. Vandamarke’s Dutch snugery. The advertisement appeared in every newspaper.

I was considerably puzzled by that advertisement—and all the more so because I could give myself no reason why I should

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be puzzled at all! But there it was, in every morning and evening newspaper in London, and Rosalie and I could certainly give these Corland people some information relating to it. We went off to St. Martin's Lane as soon as we had breakfasted; before ten o'clock we were in close consultation with a sharp-eyed man who, in my opinion, knew a lot more than he was going to let us know he knew. To him we poured out our story of our adventures since the previous evening; it seemed to amuse him immensely. But he was grave enough when the names of Trafferdale and Mrs. Kennerley came up.

"You're quite sure that she was in that flat with him?" he asked.

"She went in with him, anyway," I answered.

"You mean—you saw her go in with him at the street entrance?" he said, emphasizing the penultimate word. "But you never actually saw her in his flat? You see
——"

He was interrupted at that point by a clerk, who came and whispered to him. When the clerk had gone, he turned to us.

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“ Here’s a man who says he can give some information,” he remarked.

“ He’s coming up. Look here !—will you two just slip inside this room, and keep the door open,—and—listen ? ”

Rosalie and I obeyed him. We heard the newcomer enter. I cautiously took a peep at him through the crack of the door. There he was !—the man with the twisted finger !

CHAPTER VII

THE SUAVE VALET

BEFORE Corland had spoken more than a prefatory word or two to his caller, there slipped into that inner room, through a door in its further corner, a queer-looking little man, who with a smiling and significant nod of warning to Rosalie and myself, accompanied by a lifting of his finger to his lips, tip-toed across the floor and posting himself close to my elbow joined me in peeping through the crack, by means of which I had recognised the twisted-finger individual. He appeared to take a swift but satisfying inspection of him ; that done, he turned on us again, shook his head, smiled, and gave signs of opening his ears as wide as he had just opened his eyes. And if he listened intently, so did we—the presence of the man whom, not three hours previously, we had seen rush headlong from

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the flat at the sight of my pistol, and whom I also knew to have been concerned in the kidnapping of Mr. Vandamarke and myself, was, to say the least of it, exceedingly mystifying.

But Corland was speaking—loudly, in the manner and tone of a cross-examining counsel who means to have the truth.

“Called about our advertisement in the *Morning Post*, have you?” he was saying. “The advertisement about a stolen diamond? Very good—and who are you, pray?”

The answer came in tones which for mellifluous suavity could scarcely be equalled: you could have betted big odds on the man’s calling from his voice.

“Name of Ganderson, sir—John Ganderson,” he answered.

“Ganderson, eh? Rather uncommon name! Well, and what do you know about this matter, Ganderson?”

The answer to this direct question was prefaced by a slight cough—the sort of cough which suggests delicate diplomacy.

“Well, sir, I think I may possibly know something—perhaps a good deal. The mat-

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ter is—shall we say peculiar?—sir. And involved.”

“ Peculiar and involved, is it, Ganderson ? H’m !—then I think you’d better be as simple and plain as possible. Now—what do you know ? ”

“ Well, sir, I may say that I am a valet—by calling, sir. Not to a single gentleman, sir—I do general valeting for gentlemen who reside in Wellesford Mansion, Down Street. That’s flats, sir—superior flats, let to bachelor gentlemen. One of them is a Mr. Trafferdale. I am reluctantly obliged to remark, sir, that I think—from evidence, sir—that Mr. Tafferdale has done me ! ”

“ How ? And what’s that got to do with this ? ”

“ Well, sir—it’s this way. In addition to my valeting work, I occasionally do a little motor driving, sir—I’m a licensed driver. I’ve driven Mr. Trafferdale a good bit, at one time or another. When Mr. Trafferdale goes motoring, sir, it’s his practice to hire a first-class car from Hellingham’s, and I drive it. Last Monday afternoon, sir, Mr. Trafferdale came back early from

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the City, and told me to get the usual car; he said he wanted me to drive him down to a country house that he has in Surrey."

"Whereabouts in Surrey?"

"In the Dorking neighbourhood, sir—slopes of Leith Hill. It's a queer, ramshackle old place, sir—he sometimes went there for week-ends, with his friends. Lonely spot, sir—no houses near it."

"Well—you took him there—Monday afternoon?"

"Yes, sir. We arrived there about four o'clock. Then Mr. Trafferdale told me that he'd got what he called an amusing job for me. He said that he and two City friends of his, for a bet, wanted to play a practical but quite harmless joke on a friend of theirs; they wanted to kidnap him. He assured me that it was all a piece of fun, and that when it was over nobody would enjoy it more than the kidnapped gentleman. Well, sir, of course, I took Mr. Trafferdale's word—always been the gentleman to me, sir, Mr. Trafferdale had. So I did what he ordered, which was to take the car round to Bushington Station, where, he said, I should

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meet the two City gentlemen at a quarter past five. They'd be expecting me, he said, and I was to follow their orders exactly. I went to Bushington, sir, and the two gentlemen presently appeared."

"Did you know them, Ganderson?"

"No, sir—neither of them. I'd never seen them at Mr. Trafferdale's flat—nor anywhere else as far as I remember. They were the sort of gentlemen you see in the City, sir. Of course, sir, I should know them again."

"Well—what happened?"

"One of them—the one who afterwards seemed to be the principal, sir—spoke to me, and I told him I was at his service, by Mr. Trafferdale's orders. He then told me to drive to the foot of the little lane that leads from Marton Hill golf-links towards the high road, and to pull up there. I did so. It was then nearly dark. When the car stopped the gentlemen got out. They produced some hoods, sir—things that covered the head and shoulders—and put them on; they made me put one on, too, saying it was all part of the game. And they forced a pistol into my

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hand, saying that was part of the game, too, but assuring me that like theirs it was unloaded."

"Was that true?"

"It was in the case of mine, sir—I took good care to be sure of that! Then we waited under the trees. The gentleman came along, but he had a young gentleman with him. They were stopped, sir, and the elder gentleman whom they addressed as Mr. Vandamarke, was told it was a hold-up. Both were forced—without any violence, sir—into the car, and I drove it back to Mr. Trafferdale's. There the two gentlemen were taken into the house, and into a room where they were locked up. I don't know what went on then, sir—I was sent into the kitchen to get something to eat and drink. After a time I was told they were ready to leave, and by orders I drove the car across country to near Basingstoke. There, in sight of the town, Mr. Vandamarke and the young gentleman were put down, and I drove the other two back to Mr. Trafferdale's. Afterwards, late at night, I brought all three back to London. That's all I know—as regards Monday night, sir."

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"All you know! Then—how do you connect that with the diamond mentioned in our advertisement?"

"By putting two and two together, sir. Certainly, sir, I had no suspicions until this morning. But then, when I went to Mr. Trafferdale's flat at my usual hour, I perceived—being a person of observation, sir—that Mr. Trafferdale had fled."

"Fled? How did you know that?"

"By what I saw, sir. And I gathered why. There was an *Evening Standard* of last night, sir, lying about, with your advertisement in it, blue-pencilled. I began to see through things then. I think I have something of the detective faculty, sir. I had heard of Mr. Vandamarke—in fact, I know his under-footman. Mr. V., sir, is said to be a Diamond King. Your advertisement, sir; and what I knew of the Monday evening affair, and the fact that the state of Mr. Trafferdale's rooms showed that he had hastily packed a bag, inclined me to the opinion I now hold, sir, namely, that Mr. Trafferdale deceived me, that the kidnapping of Mr. V. was not a joke, but a real thing, and that the diamond was forced

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out of him while he was in that house. I suggest that I am not far from the truth, sir."

There was an interval of silence. The queer little man at my elbow looked at me and winked. Then he looked at Rosalie and smiled. Then, without making the least sound, he rubbed his hands together as if he were greatly enjoying his secret thoughts. And then suddenly, came Corland's voice.

"Mr. Gregg! Will you kindly step this way? Just you!"

I walked in at once, and came to a halt at the side of Corland's desk. The valet sat at the other side, a picture of polite propriety. At my entrance he rose, made an obeisance, and remained standing, his hat in one hand, his neatly-rolled umbrella in the other.

"Ever seen this gentleman before, Ganderson?" asked Corland, pointing to me.

The valet raised his eyes respectfully to mine, but there was also a slight look of reproach in them.

"I have, sir! I saw the young gentle-

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man this morning; in Mr. Trafferdale's flat—the dining-room, where I found him locked in. He threatened me with a pistol, sir. I left—hurriedly!”

“Didn't wait for any explanations, eh, Ganderson?” said Corland. “Went there and then—what?”

Ganderson sniffed.

“I am not partial to firearms, sir. I judged it best to leave. Accidents, sir, will happen.”

Corland turned on me—with a look which seemed to suggest that I should take a hand in things.

“Do you recognise *him*, Mr. Gregg?” he asked.

“Well enough!” said I, as severely as possible. “He is one of the men concerned in carrying off Mr. Vandamarke.”

“Innocently, sir, innocently!” protested the valet. “I've just explained to Mr. Corland that——”

“I think your explanations had better be given in a police-court,” I continued. “You were one of the three, and you were armed! I've half a mind——”

“I'm afraid Mr. Gregg has the power to

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give you in charge, Ganderson," interrupted Corland, with a side wink at me. "But I daresay he's open to listen to a little more of your story. Now come!—did you never really hear anything of that diamond?"

"I never did, gentlemen!—never, upon my honour! I presume, from the fact that Mr. Gregg has just emerged from a room the door of which has been open ever since I came here, that he has heard all I have had to say. And what I have said is the honest truth—neither more nor less. I don't know anything about the diamond—but my firm opinion is that Mr. Trafferdale has it. Why should he run away, gentlemen, if he hasn't?"

"We're not sure that he has run away," remarked Corland. "If you know more
——"

"I was about to say more, sir, when Mr. Gregg entered the room. My belief, sir, is that Mr. Trafferdale has fled to the Continent."

"What makes you think that?" demanded Corland.

"Because, sir, amongst the articles thrown

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here and there in the room of his flat when I first entered this morning, I found a Bradshaw's time-table, sir. It was lying open at the Great Eastern route, sir—at the tables for Harwich. In fact that page—the Harwich page—was turned down. There's an express to Harwich at 5.5 a.m., sir."

Corland again turned to me.

"That would about fit in," he said. "Harwich, eh? He may have gone over to Amsterdam—that's a big centre in the diamond world. Well, I don't know that there's anything further that I can ask you now, Ganderson. Where do you live?"

"I reside at 21c, Shepherd Street, sir," replied the valet, promptly producing a printed card. "My card, if you please, sir."

"All right—I'll let you know if and when I want you," said Corland, throwing the card into a drawer. "You can go now, Ganderson—unless Mr. Gregg wants to ask you anything further?"

"Yes," said I. "I do." I turned to Ganderson, who was half-way to the door.

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"How long have you known Mr. Trafferdale?" I asked.

"About nine months, sir," he answered. "Since he came to his flat—which is about that time since."

"You're in and out there, eh?" I suggested.

"Yes, sir—in the usual course."

"Have you ever seen a Mrs. Kennerley there?" I asked.

He shook his head—gravely.

"Not by that precise name, sir," he replied. "I have seen a lady there—once or twice. But—her name was not mentioned, sir, before me."

"What was she like?" I inquired. "Be particular, now!"

He stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Well, sir—not so much handsome as taking, sir. An engaging lady, I think, sir—a tallish, dark lady. Would that be the one you refer to, sir?"

I made no answer; his description was fairly applicable to Mrs. Kennerley. And Corland gave him another nod of dismissal.

"All right, Ganderson," he said. "We'll

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communicate with you. Better keep your lips closed in the meantime, you know."

"I hope I am a person of discretion, sir," replied the valet. "I also hope, sir, that I shall be remembered in relation to the—er, the reward, sir?"

"That's according," answered Corland. "We'll see about results. Good morning!"

"I wish you good morning, sir," said Ganderson.

He slipped out in a smooth, noiseless way; as soon as the door was closed on him, Corland glanced at the inner room and raised his voice.

"Metham!"

The queer-looking little man whom I had left with Rosalie glided in, rubbing his hands, and still smiling. He reminded me, somehow, of a terrier quivering with excitement in prospect of a rat-hunt. Corland spoke a few words to him in an undertone; he nodded silently, rubbed his hands once more, and shot out of the room. Corland turned to me.

"Well, Mr. Gregg, what did you make of that valet chap?" he asked. "You heard

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all he had to tell. Well—how did it strike you ? ”

“ I’d rather hear how it struck you,” I answered. “ I’m puzzled.”

“ So am I,” said Rosalie who just then came into the room. “ Do tell us what you think, Mr. Corland ! ”

Corland sat back in his chair, put his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, and twiddled his fingers. He laughed softly as he looked from one to the other.

“ Don’t quite know ! ” he said. “ I’m not certain that that chap wasn’t sent here—on purpose. Bluff ! ”

“ Bluff ! ” I exclaimed. “ And—sent ? Do you mean by the Trafferdale gang ? ”

“ Very likely,” he answered coolly. “ To put us off the real scent. Red herring business ! Quite possible.”

“ But—he made such a clean breast of all the doings ! ” I protested. “ He told—everything ! ”

“ Told nothing at all, my dear sir, in essence, that wasn’t known, or could have been established,” answered Corland. “ Did he tell you anything that you didn’t know ? His account of the kidnapping was in accor-

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dance with yours. He led up to—and led up skilfully—what may have been the real pertinent piece of bluff of the whole thing ! ”

“ And—what’s that ? ” I asked.

“ The suggestion that Trafferdale is off to Harwich and the Continent ! ” replied Corland, with a sceptical smile. “ I shouldn’t wonder if that’s what this fellow really came for—to put us off the track.”

“ Sent by Trafferdale ? ” I exclaimed. “ That what you mean ? ”

“ Look here ! ” said Corland. “ What time was it when Ganderson opened the door of the room in which you two were locked up ? Soon after seven ?—very well, he’d a good three hours before he came here—rather more. Where was he during that time ? Probably with Trafferdale. Time to concoct a scheme for throwing dust in our eyes. I don’t believe Trafferdale’s off to the Continent—what I believe is that there’s something behind the whole affair which is not yet apparent. I must wait until Mr. Vandamarke arrives here this afternoon. At present, as I say, I’m not at all certain that Ganderson wasn’t sent here by the very

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man he was professing to denounce ! Clever—very ! ”

“ You think Ganderson an accomplice ? ” asked Rosalie.

“ Personally, Miss Vandamarke, I do ! ” he affirmed. “ Not like the principals, but an accomplice in the sense that he’s going to profit — handsomely — by his services. He’s no fool, that fellow ! —crafty and skilful enough. However, we shall see ! ”

“ But,” said I, “ if you think this man an accomplice, isn’t it rather—— ” I hesitated, lost for the right word. “ Should he have been allowed to go away ? ” I concluded. “ That’s what I mean.”

Corland laughed, evidently amused at my innocence.

“ Don’t you bother yourself, Mr. Gregg ! ” he answered. “ Ganderson may be, as I fancy he is, a smooth-speaker, plausible, crafty individual, and as slippery as they make ’em in verbal matters. But he can’t hold a candle to the man who’s just gone out of the room—Metham—in another matter : shadowing ! Metham will keep his eye on Ganderson—till we want him ! And—

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we can't do anything more until Mr. Vandamarke comes this afternoon."

Rosalie and I left him. She wanted to go home : I decided, it being then nearly noon, to hang around until it was time to meet her father at Corlands in accordance with his wire. She presently went off in a cab, and I, with no particular purpose, strolled down St. Martin's Lane. I had gone a hundred yards when I felt a tap on my elbow, and turning sharply found Metham there.

" Mr. Gregg, sir ! " he whispered. " You can be of the greatest use to me, if you'll be so kind !—I've no time to get help elsewhere. That man, Ganderson, Mr. Gregg, met another man along here, a gentleman in appearance. They've gone into that saloon bar, across the street. When they come out, they'll most likely separate. If they do, will you follow the other man while I continue to follow Ganderson ? Ganderson doesn't know me—the other man won't know you. Slip aside here, Mr. Gregg ! "

He drew me into the mouth of a passage ; in silence we watched the door of the saloon

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bar. In a few minutes Ganderson came out with a companion. And in him I recognised the man whom Trafferdale had admitted to his flat the night before—the man with the newspaper !

CHAPTER VIII

CONFUSION WORSE CONFOUNDED

THAT this was the man I had no more doubt than that this was St. Martin's Lane. I had seen his face clearly as he stood talking to Trafferdale in the hall of the flat; there had been a brilliant light there and he had stood in its full stream for two or three minutes. He was a good-looking, well-dressed man; the sort of man not easily forgotten. I was sure about him.

I let out some sort of exclamation; Metham, at my elbow, turned eagerly.

"You know the other man?" he asked.

"Yes," said I. "He's a man I saw last night — midnight — in Trafferdale's flat."

"Mr. Gregg, you'll oblige—and help—me by following him!" he said. "I'll

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follow the other—Ganderson. But wait—they're still talking. Watch them! They won't notice—they're too absorbed."

Ganderson and the other man had come to a halt on the pavement, nearly opposite the alley into which we had retreated. They were evidently engaged in an argument. The valet was doing all the talking, or most of it; the other man seemed to be amused, or incredulous—now and then he laughed, now and then he shook his head. Finally, he drew out his watch and showed signs of movement. "They're going to part, Mr. Gregg!" whispered Metham. "Now, sir, if you please, and if you want to do your bit, follow this man in the grey suit. If you think it necessary and get in a tight corner and want help, ring up our place and tell the governor where to send to you. They're moving, Mr. Gregg—stand back a little—then—follow! An exciting game, sir!"

We drew further into the alley, still keeping our eyes on the men across the street.

With a last word to which the other responded with what was evidently a

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heartily laugh, Ganderson raised his hat respectfully, and turned up the street; my man moved leisurely away in the opposite direction.

"Now, sir!" murmured Metham.
"Twenty yards in the rear, sir, and watchfulness without seeming to watch is the ticket! Good luck, sir!"

He himself shot round the corner; an instant later I saw him strolling unconcernedly along one side of the lane while Ganderson pursued his way on the other. Then I turned to my own duties. I saw no great difficulty in doing what Metham desired. My man was easy to follow because of his smart light grey suit, his Homburg hat with its black band against a pearl-grey ground, and his tall, well-carried figure. My only danger was that he would know me—at least, I thought it more than possible that he would, having seen me at such close quarters on the night of the kidnapping. I say this because I had already come to the conclusion that he was the leader of the three hooded men—the tallest of the three; the man who had done all the talking, and who, incidentally, had

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laughed and joked most about the game of Blind Hookey in which Vandamarke had fleeced him and his companion. However, he was evidently one of those men who are guiltless of the bad habit of looking round; he marched straight ahead towards Charing Cross, at an easy pace, scarcely glancing to right or left, and apparently, from his general behaviour, very well pleased with himself and the world in general.

I followed him, bearing Metham's advice in mind, along King William Street into the Strand. He went onward towards the City, on the left-hand side, and always at the same leisurely pace, and with me some twenty yards behind him, my eyes on the Homburg hat. I kept that in view all along the Strand, past Temple Bar, down Fleet Street, up Ludgate Hill, and past St. Paul's, on the north side. Things got more crowded in Cheapside, and I ventured to decrease the distance between us. But he never looked round, and beyond once stopping for a minute or two, to look into a window, he never paused. And finally having manœuvred his way through the

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crowds at the Mansion House, he emerged into Cornhill, and half way along it turned into a narrow passage.

I hesitated then—for the first time. I was afraid of following him in there; afraid even of going up to the entry, lest he should turn suddenly and confront me. Eventually, I crossed the street and looked into the passage from the opposite pavement. Then I saw that at the end of the passage was the front and sign of a famous old City tavern, of which I had often heard but had never seen—Barley's, a place of high repute. Probably my man had gone into Barley's. Possibly, I should lose him there—there might be, and most likely was, another way out. Concluding that already he would be safely installed in Barley's, I decided to walk down the passage. As soon as I had recrossed the street, I saw that the passage was a thoroughfare—it was thronged by men and boys. I walked quickly amongst them along its length, eyeing the various entrances to Barley's as I passed. And I had just reached the end of the passage, which came out on Change Alley, when a man turning into it

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suddenly hesitated in passing me, paused, and with an amused laugh clapped me on the shoulder. I turned, half-angrily, staring at him—another smartly-dressed, smiling man who was looking at me as if he wondered that I didn't recognise him.

"Hallo, my young friend!" he exclaimed. "Got over your perilous adventure of the other night? How's the old gentleman?—had the joke explained to him by this time, I suppose?"

I was so taken aback that for a moment I stood like a fool staring at him—blankly. He laughed again, nodding towards the old tavern.

"Come and have a drink!" he said, good-naturedly. "There's — hallo, here he is!"

I turned to see the man I had followed bearing down upon us from a neighbouring door. His eyebrows went up at sight of me, and he smiled broadly.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "Kidnapped again, eh? Captor and captive have met together, eh? Come and have a drink, boys—I've been waiting——"

They had each got a hold of my arms

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by that time ; I made an effort and releasing myself looked from one to the other of them ; they meanwhile continuing to regard me with amused glances.

“ Are you two the men who figured in Monday evening’s proceedings ? ” I asked, as icily as possible. “ The—er gentlemen in grey hoods. Because if you are——”

They began to laugh loudly. The man in the Homburg hat slapped my shoulder ; they were both the sort that is given to this form of familiar salutation.

“ Because if we are, you solemnly warn us that anything we say may be used in evidence against us, eh, my boy ? ” he said, chuckling. “ Hah—hah !—nothing like a good joke ! But come into Barley’s and tell us how the old gentleman’s getting on now that he knows the story of the prank—good old sort !—and a smart old bird at wicked card games ! Come on ! ”

They moved towards the tavern, and I moved with them, resolved, now, to learn all I could. I had suddenly remembered something that Ganderson had said to Corland—that Trafferdale had told him that the kidnapping was a practical joke. Evi-

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dently, these two were of the same opinion. But I meant to know—and I affected to fall in with their humour.

They conducted me into a quiet corner of an old-fashioned room and made lavish offers of hospitality—the Homburg hat man's mind seemed to run on champagne. But I contented myself with something less likely to interfere with my mental activity.

"Instead of hobnobbing with you gentlemen," said I, assuming as genial an air as I could possibly rake up, "I ought to hand you over to the nearest policeman! Pray, are you aware that the newspapers contain an advertisement——"

"Seen it in every paper, both last night and this morning!" interrupted the elder man. "And it's rather a pity that Trafferdale delayed his explanations to the old gentleman so long—it would have saved Vandamarke all that expense. Of course, the thing will have come to an end by now—as you are doubtless aware, being the old chap's young friend."

"I haven't seen Vandamarke for two days," said I, half-carelessly, on purpose.

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"So I don't know what you're talking about! What explanations? What's the secret of the whole thing? You speak of a joke—was it a joke to carry off an elderly gentleman to a strange house and rob him—"

"Relieve is a better word!" interjected the second man. "Rob? Ugly!"

"—of a very valuable diamond?" continued I. "And all that at the point of a revolver? Don't quite see it, myself! Looks to me like——"

"There wasn't even a blank cartridge in any of the revolvers," said the elder man, speaking more seriously. "And you'll admit, my friend, that there was no violence and nothing but politeness and consideration. The whole thing was a practical joke——"

"I should call it a practical lesson," interrupted the other, "and one that was very much needed!"

"I am still in the dark!" said I. "If you like to enlighten me——"

"That's easily done," said the elder man. "It was meant as a lesson—perhaps a severe one—for Vandamarke. Vandamarke

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is practically a stranger to England. He's a very nice old, or elderly gentleman, very amiable, very kindly, but—a little conceited, a little cocksure about himself. He possesses a singularly fine diamond which he says is worth two hundred thousand pounds. Personally I doubt it——”

“So do I!” interjected the other man, with decision. “Say half!”

“Or thereabouts,” agreed the elder. “Well, Vandamarke, in spite of his experience of the world, is so foolish, so idiotic, as to carry that stone in his waistcoat pocket, and not only to carry it there but to let people know it's there, and sometimes to bring it out and show it—not being at all particular before whom! His friends have warned him, expostulated with him, prayed him—no good. And Trafferdale, who's had a good deal to do with him and been of great use to him, determined to give him a lesson and got us to help him. We've shown the foolish old man how easy it is to carry out an affair such as that of Monday night—and now, perhaps, he'll keep his precious stone in a safe place—a bank or a safe deposit!”

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"If he ever gets it back!" said I, meaningly.

They both turned on me, staring.

"If?" exclaimed the elder. "Of course he'll get it back! I saw Trafferdale at his flat, midnight, and showed him the advertisement in one of the evening papers. Trafferdale said he'd hand the diamond back this morning, and give Vandamarke a wiggling for his rashness and foolhardiness. That'll have been done by now. There's been a lot of silly fun over the business. I actually met a man who valets Trafferdale in St. Martin's Lane this morning—he, poor fool, thought his master had tricked us and run away with the boodle!"

"How do you know he hasn't?" said I, cynically. "I—if my poor opinion's worth anything—shouldn't wonder if he has! I think he has."

They turned on me, staring. The face of the elder man flushed a little. He thrust his hand in his waistcoat pocket and drew out a card-case.

"Oh, come!" he exclaimed. "That's going a bit too far, my young friend! Traffer-

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dale's an honourable man—well known in the City and elsewhere. So are we—we're honourable men!"

He laid a card before me; the other man followed suit. I glanced at them; they bore good names, names which I remembered hearing of as connected with big financial affairs, and the addresses were unexceptionable. But I affected scepticism.

"Gentlemen!" said I, "I have no doubt you are, in everything, precisely honourable. But there is such a thing as a catspaw! How do you know that Trafferdale has not made catspaws of both of you?"

They stared incredulously again, and then laughed.

"Excellent!" exclaimed the older man. "We're the sort that catspaws are made of! But perhaps we're being wise in our own conceit?"

I determined to put my cards on the table.

"I think you are!" I retorted. "And to give some proof of it, I'll tell you something. You say you—" I turned to the man I had followed—"you were in

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Trafferdale's flat in Down Street last night—midnight. So was I!"

"Not when I was there!" said he, emphatically.

"When you were there!" I affirmed. "I saw you!"

"I never saw you, then," he answered. "Where were you?"

"In the room opposite the hall door," I replied. "Watching through the keyhole—a conveniently large one. I was locked up!"

"Locked up!" he exclaimed. "Who—who locked you up?"

"Trafferdale!" I said. "There's no need to go into details—I accidentally saw the diamond in Trafferdale's possession last night, and I followed him to his flat intent on regaining it for Vandamarke. Trafferdale turned me into that room—and locked me in!"

"And—you saw me?" he asked, still half-incredulous.

"I saw you!" I repeated. "I saw you come in—you showed Trafferdale a paper—he and you seemed to discuss something in it——"

"The advertisement!" he muttered.

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"Then you went with him into another room," I continued. "And now I'll ask you a question. Didn't you find a lady in there?"

His eyebrows rose and his lips opened in sheer astonishment.

"A lady!" he exclaimed. "In Trafferdale's flat? No!—there was no lady there!"

"There was!" said I. "If she wasn't in the room you went into, she was in another. She was there!—I saw her go in with him. And I'll tell you who she was, too—Vandamarke's private secretary, Mrs. Kennerley! Come, now!—there's rather more in all this than you know of, isn't there? What about my catspaw theory?"

That they were bewildered, and in no ordinary degree, it was easy to perceive. The older man began rubbing his chin, thoughtfully.

"How did you get out?" he asked suddenly.

"That valet man, Ganderson, whom you met in St. Martin's Lane this morning, came to his duties and unlocked the door," I answered. "I walked out—after a slight inspection of the premises. That inspection

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led me to believe that your worthy and honourable friend Mr. Trafferdale had made a hasty departure. I still believe it—and so does Ganderson.”

“ Oh, I know what Ganderson thinks ! ” he remarked, with a shrug of his shoulders. “ Ganderson stopped me up town, and told me his tale ; told me, too, that he’d just been to Corlands and that he was living in hopes of the reward or some of it. But—this is a very queer business ! You’re positive about this Kennerley woman ? ”

“ Mrs. Kennerley was in that flat when you were ! ” I declared. “ That’s a fact ! ”

He suddenly jumped up from the corner in which we were sitting, and crossing the room went into a hall in which stood a telephone-box. As he entered it, the other man spoke.

“ It’s utterly incredible to me that what you and that valet chap suggest should be right ! ” he said. “ Trafferdale is the sort of man that will carry a practical joke through—and in this case he’d a really serious motive behind it—but he’s a straight man. I can’t think——”

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"There's a two-hundred-thousand-pound diamond in question," said I.

"Oh, rot!" he exclaimed. "Not worth that!—say half. But if it were worth half-a-million, it wouldn't pay Trafferdale, a City man—why, of course, his career would be finished, and he himself—oh, it's ridiculous!"

"Then why these goings on of last night?" I asked.

"That's what I can't make out," he answered. "Obvious preparations for a hurried flight, you say? Well——"

The older man came back, shaking his head.

"I rang up Trafferdale's," he said, as he rejoined us. "He hasn't been at his office this morning. But—they don't know anything there about any journey."

"Of course they don't!" said I, cynically. "Is it likely?"

They both regarded me with some severity.

"Well!—stick to your own opinion!" said the older man. "We've ours. And, since we've told you so much, and as you're Vandamarke's friend, we'll say more—you can tell Vandamarke that we're at his disposal. But my belief is that by this

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time Trafferdale has seen Vandamarke, explained the whole thing, and given him back his diamond, with an admonition not to talk about or display it."

The mention of Vandamarke reminded me of my appointment with him, and looking at my watch I found that I had only just time to keep it. I parted with my two new-found friends, not without more jocular remarks on their part, and hurried off to find a taxi-cab. But when I walked into Corland's office, he shook his head at me.

"Mr. Vandamarke's been and gone," he said. "He came a bit before his time. And while waiting for you, he telephoned to his house, to his daughter. Now here's more mystery! The butler replied that Miss Vandamarke went out with you, very early this morning, and has never returned. So the old gentleman has hurried off there, to see if you'd gone there with her instead of coming here. Do you know anything of her?"

"I? No!" I exclaimed. "She got into a cab, outside your office, hours ago, to go straight home. What on earth——"

The telephone bell rang sharply. Corland

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picked up the receiver, and instantly turned to me.

“For you,” he said. “Metham’s asking for you—if here.”

He shoved the thing into my hand....

“Mr. Gregg?” said Metham. “That you? Come to me, sir, at once—fast as you can—bottom of Wells Street. Hurry!”

CHAPTER IX

THE POSTCARD AND THE LETTER

I SAW Metham, at the end of Wells Street, before he saw me. He was standing by a corner shop, gazing intently up the street; so intently, indeed, that I was at his side and had touched his shoulder before he was aware of my presence. He started at the touch and faced round.

“Mr. Gregg!” he whispered, as if profoundly moved by secrecy and mystery. “That man Ganderson is up there!—outside a block of flats. He’s been there, standing first on one leg and then on the other, so to speak, for some time. I’ve been watching him—to see if he went anywhere, or if anybody joined him. I wished I’d somebody with me!—but I risked taking my eye off him for a few minutes while I telephoned to Corlands. What can he be doing here

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—Wells Street? Do you know anything about Wells Street in connection with this case, Mr. Gregg?"

"Yes!" said I, remembering what Rosalie Vandamarke had told me. "I do! You heard all that passed this morning between Mr. Corland and myself and Ganderson? Well, didn't you hear a Mrs. Kennerley mentioned? Just so!—well, Mrs. Kennerley has a flat in Wells Street."

He gave another start, and made a grimace.

"Then that's it!" he said. "I thought so!"

"Thought what?" I asked.

"Thought that Ganderson was following a man and a woman," he answered. "Seemed to me that he was—I'd been after him, in various places, for some time; he'd loitered here and there all the morning. But about noon he appeared to be after somebody himself, and I noticed a man and a woman in front of him. That was there in Oxford Street. When I turned the corner after Ganderson, here into Wells Street, I saw him right enough, but I didn't see them."

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"Did you see them at close quarters?" I asked.

"Only sufficiently to see that the man was tall, the woman tallish and dark," he replied. "Of course, I was never near them—Ganderson was between them and me."

"Sounds like Trafferdale and Mrs. Kennerley," I said. "Probably, if it was, they've gone into her flat. Well?—what's to be done, now I'm here?"

He nodded up the street, where I could see the valet loafing about. "Ganderson doesn't know me, or what I'm after," he said. "I don't want him to—until we know what he's after. Supposing you go up—just as if by accident—find out what he's doing there, and, if you think it wise, signal me to join you? If you want me, Mr. Gregg, pull out your handkerchief, and I'll come along."

"Very well," said I. "And I'm to use my own discretion about that?"

"Precisely!" said he. "But if you find out, for instance, that those two people were Trafferdale and Mrs. Kennerley, and that he's waiting or watching for them,

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signal. But if not, leave him and come away—so that I can continue watching him.”

I nodded, and walked slowly up the street, affecting to see nothing in particular. When I drew near him, Ganderson was at the corner of Margaret Street, staring as if in sheer abstraction at a doorway opposite. Suddenly he caught sight of me, and—as if involuntarily—moved forward.

“Hallo!” said I. “What are you doing here?”

In spite of the unusualness of our meeting, Ganderson immediately became the suave and polite serving-man.

“I am not sorry to see you here, sir,” he answered, lifting his hat. “The fact of the case is, sir, I have been very much puzzled as to what I ought to do. I considered the advisability of enlisting the services of the police, but then, I was not sure that I was justified—I am not a man given to extreme or severe measures, sir.”

“What’s it all about, Ganderson?” I asked. “This morning’s affair?”

“I conclude that it has some bearing on that, sir,” he answered. “You remember

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that you asked me at Mr. Corland's if I had ever seen a lady at Mr. Trafferdale's flat?—a lady whom you named as Mrs. Kennerley—and I replied that I had seen a lady there, but did not know her name. Well, sir, some little time after leaving Mr. Corland's office this morning. I saw that lady—and Mr. Trafferdale with her!"

"You did?" I exclaimed.

"I did, sir," he replied. "And, in view of everything, I considered it my duty to keep them in sight. I followed them from Regent Street to this place, sir—they went into that doorway opposite. And since then, sir, I have not seen them. But—I am positively certain they have not emerged."

"You've watched carefully?" I suggested.

"With the utmost care, sir, for an hour by my watch," he answered. "Into that door they walked, but out of it they have not come!"

I hesitated no longer, but pulled out my handkerchief and made a show of using it. Metham came strolling along. I pointed him out as he came.

"Look here, Ganderson," said I, "this is one of Corlands' clerks. He's assisting

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me, and we'll tell him what you've seen and hear what he advises. Then——"

Metham's advice, given as soon as he had heard what I told him, was eminently practical—to cross the road and look at the names of the people on the board in the hall of the flats. We went over at once—and there, before our eyes, was, at any rate, one name that was familiar:—No. 8, *Mrs. Kennerley*.

"All right!" said Metham. "Now, Mr. Gregg, sir, you're the man to tackle this job! You've a cause of complaint against these two. They made you a prisoner! Go up; ring the bell—if either Trafferdale or the lady answer it, don't enter, but call me over these balusters. The thing is to ascertain if they're there. Now, sir—over the top!"

I had been over the top—in another way—more than once, in Flanders, but I honestly believe that I funked this variation of a courageous method of warfare: certainly I went up those stairs unwillingly. I had no great desire to meet either Mrs. Kennerley or Trafferdale again, and no idea of what to say to them if I did meet them,

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for I was still wholly perplexed by the events of the morning. But the thing had got to be done, and up I went, carefully noting my surroundings. This was a stone staircase, set in the middle of the house; on the first landing were doors numbered 1 and 2; on the next, others numbered 3 and 4; then, on a third came 5 and 6; it was not until I had climbed to the fourth that I saw number 8, side by side with 7. There were other floors above me; it was a tall building. And it was quiet and silent; all the way up I saw nobody.

There was an electric bell-push in the door of number 8, and I put my finger on it and heard the sharp tinkle somewhere inside the flat. But no answer came. I rang again—and presently, no reply coming, again. And I listened, close to a letter slit in the panel before my nose—and heard nothing.

The door of number 7 suddenly opened, and a pretty girl, who looked like an actress, came out and closed it behind her. She glanced at me and at the door by which I stood.

“Do you want Mrs. Kennerley?” she

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asked. "I believe she's out—I met her going down the stairs as I came up, half-an-hour ago."

I thanked her; she tripped away downstairs, humming a tune. I was about to follow her when, on some impulse which I could never explain to myself, I turned the handle of the door before me. It gave in my hand; the flat was open!

I hesitated a second or two, and then, pushing the door ajar, I looked inside. There was a small hall, or square lobby within; immediately opposite me was an open door, admitting to a parlour. And there, in an easy chair, his head thrown back against the padding, his whole body relaxed as if in sleep, sat—Trafferdale! I stood, staring at him, for a full minute. Then I coughed, loudly. He showed no sign of having heard me. I repeated the cough—louder. As far as I could see there was not the flicker of an eyelid nor the twitch of a finger. And at that I stepped inside and looked round. There were two other doors open. One admitted to a little kitchen; the other to a bedroom—a woman's room. It was in something of confusion—drawers and ward-

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robes were open ; an evening gown was thrown carelessly across the bed. I remembered that gown ; it was the one Mrs. Kennerley had worn on the previous evening. And there was not a soul to be seen in either bedroom or kitchen.

Secure in the knowledge that I still had my pistol in my pocket, and keeping a hand convenient to it (as an Irishman would say) in case of sudden attack, I went cautiously into the parlour and up to the side of the man in the easy chair. I touched his shoulder—gently at first ; then with a firm pressure ; eventually I shook it. You might as well have shaken the chair in which he sprawled. And suddenly I realised that this was not sleep at all ; not natural sleep, at any rate, and in a moment I was at the top of the staircase and calling softly for the men down below.

They came running up—Metham first. I beckoned him within the flat and pointed to Trafferdale. He uttered a sharp exclamation, hurried forward, and bent over Trafferdale's face. Instantly he turned on me.

“ The woman ? ” he exclaimed. “ Where is she ? ”

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“There’s no woman here!” said I. “There’s nobody here—but him. Did you see a girl come downstairs just now? Well, she came out of the next flat, and she said she’d seen Mrs. Kennerley going away half-an-hour ago. But—what’s the matter with him?”

Metham turned again from Trafferdale.

“Matter?” he said. “Why, he’s drugged, Mr. Gregg, drugged! Maybe poisoned! Look there—and smell!”

He picked up a tumbler which had stood on a small table by the side of Trafferdale’s chair, and after smelling it himself thrust it into my hand. There was the smell of brandy, stale, nauseous, about it, but there was also another smell, of something acrid, penetrating.

“Drugged, of course!” said Metham. “That’s the woman’s work! She’s off!—with that diamond! Well....”

He looked round. His eyes fell on Gander-son, who had followed us into the room and was staring at Trafferdale.

“We’ll have to get a doctor,” said Metham, suddenly. “Here, you!—run into Margaret Street—sure to be a doctor somewhere round

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there—get one, anyway, and bring him back here, quick as you can.”

Ganderson coughed—discreetly.

“ I am well acquainted with this quarter of the town, gentlemen,” he said, giving us a knowing look. “ I know a very clever medical man in Hollis Street, not far away—one, gentlemen, who can be relied on in—er, delicate circumstances. I conclude that publicity is not—desirable ? ”

“ Go and fetch him, man, quick ! ” commanded Metham, waving him away. “ This fellow may be dying !—and we want information out of him ! Publicity ! ” he continued, sneeringly, when Ganderson had gone. “ I reckon we shall soon get plenty of that, Mr. Gregg !—this is going to be a police case. And—I don’t know whether we oughtn’t to call them in at once.”

I turned and looked at Trafferdale. He was breathing, to be sure ; heavily and regularly, but in all other respects he might have been dead ; he was so motionless, so apparently unconscious. Metham raised one of his eyelids.

“ Lay anything he’s poisoned, Mr. Gregg ! ” he muttered. “ I think I can see through

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the whole thing. When they left that flat in Down Street during the night, they came here, intending to lay quiet until they could get off—that would be his intention, anyway. And she's drugged him, got the diamond from him, and made off with it! Do you say that girl said half-an-hour? Well—half-an-hour's start is good enough, if you've laid your plans!"

I was thinking—wondering, really, how this last development fitted in with what I had heard from the two City men in that quiet old tavern. I had meant to tell Corland about that, and to hear his opinion, but had had no chance. And now, as we awaited the return of Ganderson and the doctor, I told Metham. He listened eagerly and his keen face grew keener.

"Ah—ah!" he said, with a knowing look. "I'm beginning to see through things a bit! Strikes me, Mr. Gregg, that the woman has been at the bottom of the whole thing. Pretty ingenious, too!—now, if you ask me, I should say that she's hocused this chap as he hocused the men you've been talking to. Probably, she persuaded him to play this practical joke on Mr.

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Vandamarke, and once he'd got the diamond into his possession, treated him like—like this!—to get it into her's. I'll bet anything it isn't on him, anyhow!"

And then, without demur, he began, as far as he could, to go through Trafferdale's pockets, showing a remarkable dexterity in doing so. But he turned out nothing remarkable, and the result of his investigations made him shake his head.

"Looks to me as if she'd cleared him out before going," he said. "Nothing in his note-case, you see, where a man like him would be likely to carry a fair bit of money, and nothing in his purse or pockets but some very small change. Now if we'd only been on the scene an hour earlier, Mr. Gregg, we should—what's that?"

A smart double knock sounded on the outer door, which I had closed after Gander-son went out. Metham glanced into the lobby.

"Postman," he said. "Letters—a letter and a postcard." He picked them up and re-entered the parlour. "We'll take the liberty of reading the postcard, I think. Um—looks like an appointment." He handed

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the postcard, which was addressed to Mrs. Kennerley, to me, pointing to the communication on the reverse side. There was little of that, and to anyone not in the sender's and the recipient's secrets, it was mystifying. All that appeared was a line of initials and figures; two sets of these, with a short, underlined word between them :

B. M. 3.15. oder H. G. 4.30.

" Now what do you make of that, Mr. Gregg ? " asked Metham. " Cryptic, what ? But I should say—an appointment. B.M., eh ? Probably means British Museum. But that word in the middle ?—underscored. What's that signify ? Foreign, eh ? "

" German," said I. "*Oder* means *or*."

" Oh ! " said he. " Ah !—then, if that's an appointment it was an alternative one. She was to meet the sender of this at B.M., at a quarter-past-three, or at H.G. at half-past-four. Just so—but you see, Mr. Gregg, she went out before the postcard was delivered ! So, even supposing we could ascertain the exact meaning of these initials,

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B.M., or H.G., we should have small chance of catching her at either."

He turned the postcard over, pointing out to me that it had been posted in the City just before noon. Then he looked at the letter which he had picked up with it.

"Post-mark of this—Birmingham," he said. "Now if this had fallen into the hands of some of these detective chaps——"

But I interrupted him with an exclamation.

"By George!" said I. "That's Mr. Vandamarke's handwriting! I know it—well enough!"

"Vandamarke's, eh?" he said. "Ah!—I think I heard he'd gone to Birmingham. And, of course, she was his private secretary! Well——"

He came to a sudden pause because I had gripped his arm with one hand and taken the letter from him with the other.

"Metham!" I said. "Under the circumstances, I'm going to open that letter! I'll answer to Mr. Vandamarke for doing so. For anything we know it may give us a valuable clue. Anyway—here goes!"

I slit the envelope with my penknife

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and drew out a folded sheet of letter-paper, bearing the address of a well-known Birmingham hotel, and the date of the previous day. I spread it out on the table ; we both bent over it. And Metham let out an exclamation of disgust.

“ Good lord ! ” he said. “ Worse than the postcard ! ”

There were three or four lines of writing before us, several words in each line. But it was all gibberish. Some words were of consonants without vowels ; some of vowels without consonants. A bold V. terminated the lot.

“ That’s a communication in cypher ! ” said I. “ She’d understand it ; we don’t ! And so——”

Just then Ganderson hurried in with the doctor, and we stood by to await the latter’s examination of Trafferdale. Within a few minutes we knew that our suspicions were correct : Trafferdale had been heavily drugged. But he was not in danger of death, and leaving him with the doctor and the valet, Metham and I hurried out to the nearest telephone-box, to ring up Corland, I carrying off the letter and the

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postcard. As things were, we must get quickly on Mrs. Kennerley's track.

In the telephone-box Metham turned sharply from the receiver to me.

"Mr. Gregg!" he whispered. "I'm to hurry back to the office, quick! But you!—Miss Vandamarke has just rung Corlands up for you, if you were there. She's waiting for you at Hatton Garden post office, and she wants you to get there as fast as you can!"

CHAPTER X

THE TWILIGHT CHASE

I HAD turned to get out of that place before Metham had well finished speaking. But quick as I was, he was quicker, and had a grip on my arm ere I could cross the threshold.

“Wherever you’re going, or go, keep in touch with us, Mr. Gregg!” he murmured in my ear. “If Miss Vandamarke’s down that way it’s most likely something to do with this affair, and there may be danger, and you may want assistance. Ring up Corlands if there’s anything of that sort—I’m going straight there!”

I nodded, tore my arm from his grasp, and made for the nearest taxi-cab; within a few seconds I was careering eastward. But on what errand?—and should I find Rosalie at the specified place? For anything I knew to the contrary she might

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have rung up Corlands some time ago, and now, weary of waiting, have gone away. In any case, I was anxious—the mere fact that she had never returned home, whereas her last words to me in St. Martin's Lane had been that she was particularly desirous of doing so at once, seemed to me to argue that something connected with the diamond had prevented her. And knowing her to be a spirited and venturesome girl, I thought it possible that if I did not rush up in answer to her summons she might enter on some risky procedure of her own that, as Metham had suggested, might be full of danger.

I purposely stopped my driver as we came near to Holborn Circus, and leaving the cab, stole cautiously round the corner into Hatton Garden. And there I at once saw Rosalie—she was standing in the doorway of the post office, looking about her. At sight of me, her eyes brightened; she came towards me.

“Got here quick as I could!” I exclaimed, pantingly, being, somehow, as flustered as if I had run all the way. “I wasn't at Corlands—they had to ring me up else-

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where. But what are you doing here?—what is it?”

She gave me a significant look.

“Mrs. Kennerley!” she whispered. “She’s somewhere about! I followed her.”

“Good lord!” said I. “I’ve just come from her flat in Wells Street. That man of Corlands’—Metham—and I went there, and found Trafferdale alone—drugged!”

“Drugged!” she exclaimed.

“And looking like death—to me,” I said. “She, of course, was gone—and probably the diamond’s in her pocket! But—you?”

“Come inside!” she whispered. “Keep your eye up the street—the other side, some eight or ten doors up—while I tell you. She’s somewhere about there, in one of those offices, but I don’t know which—couldn’t get near enough to see, and they’re all so much alike outside. It was this way,” she went on, when we had stepped aside out of the fairly busy traffic on the sidewalk. “I went into Oxford Street on my way home to do some shopping that I suddenly remembered. It took longer than I’d thought for, so, as there was no one

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at home, I concluded to have some lunch there. That wasted an hour. Then, when I went out to go home, I saw—her!”

“Alone?” I interjected.

“Alone! She came out of a shop near Waring’s—heavily veiled, but I knew her well enough—knew her gown and her hat, too. She didn’t catch sight of me, though I was close to her, and I took good care that she shouldn’t. But I followed her. She came along east and presently went into another shop—a chemist’s. Then I determined to do the thing properly. There was a taxi-cab close by—disengaged. I got hold of the driver—a young, sharp-looking man, and told him the situation in a few words. ‘If she comes out and gets a cab, follow wherever she goes!’ I said. ‘If she doesn’t, but walks, drive me at a slow pace after her. The thing is to keep her in sight and keep me out of her’s!’”

“‘Get in and sit well back, miss,’ he said. I got in. ‘Now,’ he said, leaning in at the window, ‘just give me an idea of what she’s like, and I’ll keep her in view till you get what you want!’ I told

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him what to look for, and sat back in the cab. Presently, he gave me a wink—she'd come out, and again moved east. We followed. She got a cab at the end of Tottenham Court Road; that, too, went east. We followed her right into the City—an awful long way!—past St. Paul's, and the Bank, and into and past places I'd never seen before, and finally to a street off Bishopsgate. There my man stopped, and presently he looked through the window. 'She's gone into some offices three doors along, miss,' he said. 'What shall I do?' 'Wait awhile, to see if she comes out,' I answered. 'Has she sent her cab away?' 'No, it's there—waiting,' he replied. 'Then we'll wait,' I said. 'What street is this?' I asked. 'This, miss,' he answered, 'is Bevis Marks'——

I interrupted her with a sharp exclamation. Bevis Marks!—that, of course, was the B.M. of the postcard! And the H.G. following it was Hatton Garden. I saw it all in a flash. The postcard was from some accomplice, telling Mrs. Kennerley to go to Bevis Marks at one hour or to Hatton Garden at another. And

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when the postcard arrived she had already gone!

"Go on!" I said to Rosalie. "Never mind me—I just thought of something. Yes—you were in Bevis Marks—great centre for Jews!"

"Just so," she asserted. "The driver told me. Well, within a few minutes she reappeared, and her cab moved off. We followed—at a safe distance. She came west again. At that corner—over there—her cab stopped and she got out. I'd just time to pay my man and to get round into this street after her, when she disappeared into one of those offices along there, on the opposite side. I ventured on walking past the doors, but they're all very much alike, and I don't know which she entered. Judging from the signs they nearly all seem to be connected with the diamond trade."

"This is the London centre of that particular industry!" said I. "They play marbles with diamonds about here. But—you've not seen her since?"

"No!" she replied. "The instant I'd tracked her here, I slipped into that post

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office and telephoned for you at Corlands. But I got through instantly, and wasn't five minutes in the place, and I've been watching ever since. What shall we do?"

"Nothing for it but to wait developments," I answered. "But if you'll keep an eye on the street, I'll let Corlands know where we are."

"And there's father," she said. "He ought to know—he'll be anxious."

"Leave that to me," said I. "I'll see to it." And hurrying into the post office I rang up Vandamarke's house first. The butler answered my call; Mr. Vandamarke, he said, had been home, learned that Miss Vandamarke had not yet returned, and had gone off again—where, he didn't know. Then I rang up Corlands and got hold of Metham; he answered that he'd just learned something of importance and would come on to me at once, to tell it; at that I went back to Rosalie. "Anything happened?" I asked as I rejoined her. "Seen anybody?"

"Nothing's happened, and I haven't seen her," she replied. "This is slow work! What are we to do?"

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"Metham's coming along," I replied. "He may suggest something. But we're in luck—in one way!"

"What luck?" she asked, drawing her wraps around her. "I'm cold!"

"The luck that it's rapidly growing dusk," said I. "We can see without being seen. Let's walk up and down opposite the offices you say she went into."

We went slowly up the street. The gas-lamps had already been lighted, and lights were twinkling in the windows on either side. And suddenly Rosalie gripped my arm, pulling me to a halt.

"There she is!" she exclaimed. "There!—that window—opposite!" I looked across. The house to which she pointed was a dingy, drab-looking place; its entry was dark; the windows downstairs were unlighted; that part of the premises seemed to be unoccupied. But on the first floor some hand had just switched on a brilliant flood of electric light, and at one of the windows we plainly saw Mrs. Kennerley, in the act of pulling down the blind. It fell, and hid her; at the same moment a man came to the other window and let its blind down;

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we saw his shadow and her's cross the lights within and disappear.

"That was she!" affirmed Rosalie. "I saw her plainly!"

"Oh, yes, that was she!" I agreed. "So—now we know where she is. But the thing is—what to do next?"

"Why not go in and demand the diamond?" she suggested. "I'm game!"

"No, I think not," said I. "Let's wait for Metham—he'll not be long, and he's a sharp fellow. He'll have some idea of what to do, and then——"

Just then Metham came hurrying along. I hastily told him of what we knew. Without a word, he slipped across the street and disappeared into the doorway of the house opposite. I saw him strike a match in there and shield the flame in his hand. The glimness died out; he came back.

"First floor, Gartenbaum & Caltiaides, diamond merchants," he whispered. "So she's there, is she? Doing, or trying to do a deal, Mr. Gregg, eh? All right!—pretty safe as long as we know where she is. Chilly work for you, miss, hanging about, but——"

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"What was it you said you'd heard on going back to Corlands?" I asked him.

He drew me aside, whispering.

"Got it from the guv'nor," he answered.

"Cute chap, Corland! Been making some quiet inquiries during the day about Trafferdale, since he heard what you and the valet had to say this morning. Trafferdale's in a bad way, financially. Rumours in the City about him, you understand. And yesterday, drew nearly all his available balance at his bank—cash! I guess she's got that," he continued, nodding at the lighted window. "Done him in all round, I should say! Adventuress, probably——"

"Miss Vandamarke says that she was recommended to Mr. Vandamarke by Trafferdale," I said. "That would look as if——"

"She was some creature of his, eh?" he interrupted with a cynical laugh. "Ay, well, if that was so, Mr. Gregg, she's turned on him! There's no doubt about it that from what we saw in Wells Street, she drugged him and made off. And——"

"The light's gone out!" exclaimed Rosalie.

Metham and I turned sharply. The win-

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dows on the first floor had darkened ; now the entire front of the house was in gloom. Metham drew us back.

“ Now, watch ! ” he muttered. “ The doorway ! ”

It was by that time quite dark, and impossible to identify faces across the street. But there was no mistaking Mrs. Kennerley's figure when it emerged from the door and presently came into view under a neighbouring gas-lamp. There was a man with her—a short, stumpy-figured man in a long overcoat, whose general appearance gave one the impression that he was a foreigner ; we could see him using his hands, nodding his head, as, side by side, he and she turned up the street.

“ All right ! ” said Metham, holding me back as I impulsively started in pursuit. “ No hurry, Mr. Gregg—they won't escape me ! You and Miss Vandamarke keep on this side ; I'll take the other.”

He slipped quietly across the street and began to saunter after the couple in front, while we, both eager and excited, followed on our side. Presently, Mrs. Kennerley and her companion came to Charles Street. They

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turned into it as if they were going towards Farringdon Road. But suddenly they disappeared again—this time into a doorway at the side of a shop. And presently Metham approached that doorway, vanished within it for a second, and came out again; he crossed over to us.

“Offices over there—several, on various floors,” he remarked, laconically. “They’ve gone up—we must wait.”

But we had scarcely five minutes to wait for the next development—and that was a startling one. A motor car, a smart, powerful, private affair, came up the street from the direction of the City; as it passed us we could see its sole occupant, a big, broad-shouldered man in a fur-collared coat, whose face, for a second, was plainly visible. And Rosalie let out a sharp exclamation.

“I know that man!” she said, with marked agitation in her voice. “He’s—he’s a friend—business friend—of my father’s; he’s dined with us, once or twice. What can he be doing——”

“Watch!” interrupted Metham. “The car’s stopping—there!”

The car was slowing up in front of the

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doorway from which Metham had just come back. The fur-collared man got out, said something to his chauffeur and disappeared in the direction taken by Mrs. Kennerley and her companion. Metham turned to Rosalie ; his tone became eager and significant.

“ The name of that man ? ” he said sharply. “ What is it ? ”

“ Mr. Sanderwell ! ” she answered promptly. “ A financial man, of course. I know where he lives, too—I’ve addressed invitations there.”

“ Where, then ? ” demanded Metham. “ As like as not, he’ll go there when he comes out, and it’s my impression those other two will go with him.”

“ Ellacombe Lodge, Campden Hill,” said Rosalie, as promptly as before.

“ But——” Metham did not wait to hear what more she had to say. With a whispered command to me to stay where we were, he suddenly turned up the collar of his overcoat, pulled down the flap of his slouch hat, and shot off across the street, as if he were going clean away. But in a dark patch of it, lower down, he turned on

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his heel and came lounging back, looking in at the shop windows. Presently he was stationary before that at which the car stood, and apparently taking great interest in its contents.

A few minutes passed. Then the fur-collared man reappeared, ushering Mrs. Kennerley out of the doorway; the little foreign-looking man was behind them. All three got into the car; as the chauffeur was closing the door, Metham turned, and walked by. And as the car moved off, he crossed over to us.

"Got it!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "He said 'Home!' And according to Miss Vandamarke that's in Campden Hill Road. Mr. Gregg—I think you and I'll go there! But you, Miss Vandamarke—hadn't you better be going——"

"I'm not going home, if that's what you mean," she retorted quickly. "I'm going to see this out—it's exciting!"

"It may become a bit too exciting, you know," observed Metham, warningly. "There's some game going on that may have desperate developments in it. Let's put you into a cab now, miss, and then——"

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“No!” she said firmly. “That woman’s got my father’s diamond, and I’m after it and her. Let me come, Mr. Gregg!” she continued, turning to me. “You’ll take care of me!”

Metham laughed; the last words seemed to afford him great amusement. “Come on, then, both of you,” he said. “What we want now is a good taxi—leave it to me.”

The car and its three occupants was by this time vanished. But Metham showed no great anxiety to pursue it. He walked us leisurely to the nearest cab rank; he picked out a cab; he gave its driver some whispered instructions; we all got in and went off westward. It was a longish drive, and when we got out we were in a part of the town of which I knew little. Metham, however, seemed to know it well enough, and after leaving the cab he led us round one or two corners and finally into a road where all the houses seemed to be detached and standing in walled gardens amongst trees and thick shrubberies. And there presently we came across a square-built, substantial-looking mansion of the villa-residence

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sort, on the gate-post of which we saw the name "Ellacombe Lodge" in black letters. This house, like all thereabouts, stood in its own grounds or gardens, and it was not easy to get any view of it. The front wall was a good seven or eight feet high; the door in it was a solid one. But there was no one near, and after we had lingered a minute or two, listening, Metham suggested that I should give him a leg up and let him peep over the coping. He scrambled up with my aid, and almost instantly dropped back.

"There's precious little sign of life about the place in the way of light!" he muttered. "But there is a light—a crack of light in the front room, as if it came from between shutters. Mr. Gregg!—I think we'd better take prompt action. Look here!—I don't believe there's any other way out of this place than by this door, because, do you see, there are two bells set in this post—one for visitors, one for tradesmen. Now I suggest that you and Miss V. keep watch here, and I'll hurry round to the nearest call-box, tell Corland where we are, and ask him to come on at once with any help

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or force he wants. There's no doubt that woman and the two men are here——"

"Supposing they come out while you're gone?" I suggested.

"Stop them and plump them straight out about the diamond and all the rest of it," he answered. "That's what I should do, or shall do. Anyway, it's best to bring things to a head. And I shan't be long—I know where to get on to the telephone."

He hurried off in the darkness, leaving Rosalie and myself at the closed door. It was very quiet there; there was nothing but the subdued hum of the traffic on the big main roads north and south of us. Without any particular intention, I laid my hand on the closed door, and to my astonishment found that it yielded to my touch.

"This door's open!" I whispered. "Look here!—I'm going in! I'm going to see if I can get a look into that room—where the light is!"

"Be careful!" she said. "Supposing——"

But with a murmur of caution to her, I slipped quietly inside the door and into the shadow of the shrubberies that flanked the garden. Step by step I made my way

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towards the house over the soft mould in the garden beds. As I drew nearer, I saw that the crack in the shutters through which the light shone was wider than Metham had indicated. And at that I crept stealthily to the window and looked into the room.

CHAPTER XI

THE VERY OLD MAN

I COULD see into the room quite well. It was a room of a good size ; square, with alcoves on either side the big fireplace, and folding doors at the further wall, evidently communicating with an apartment at the back of the house. The furniture was old-fashioned ; there was not very much of it. And the people in the room were three ; the three who had got into the private car in Charles Street. Mrs. Kennerley sat in an easy chair by the hearth ; the big, fur-coated man lounged against the mantelpiece ; the little foreign-looking person sat on the edge of a table in the middle of the room, swinging his stumpy legs. And in the centre of the table, on a patch of dark cloth, glittering and coruscating in the light of the lamps, lay—the diamond !

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It seemed to me that these people were waiting for something, for somebody; they had that air. Now and then they glanced at the diamond; now and then at a door on the left of the room, which I judged to open into the hall, and was slightly ajar. Once, as I watched, the fur-collared person strode, evidently with impatience, to the door, looked through the slight aperture, listened, and came back to his post. They exchanged remarks, too, now and then, but it was obvious that they were short; Mrs. Kennerley's share in them, I could see, was monosyllabic. Before I had been watching two minutes I was certain that these three were waiting for a fourth person to join them. And I had little doubt that that fourth person was a possible purchaser of the Vandamarke stone that shone on the table, nor that it had been laid there, on its background of black velvet cloth, to tempt his eyes as soon as he entered. The sight of that diamond stirred my pulses in another way. I was born impetuous—and I had my trusty automatic in my pocket. It seemed to me that if I could only get into that house, steal along the hall to

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the door of the room, enter before any of them realised my presence, and cover them with my pistol, I could snatch up the diamond and make my retreat with absolute success. Once outside, with the diamond in my grasp....

I am afraid that I didn't think of Rosalie Vandamarke at that moment!—or, if I did, it was in thinking that I should cut a very fine and heroic figure if I suddenly appeared at her side with the pistol in one hand and the rescued diamond in the other. I daresay I was an ass—but the fact remains that I slipped away from the window, edged my way through the laurel bushes to the front door and stole cautiously up the two or three steps that led to it. Just as cautiously, and after listening intently for a full minute, I turned the heavy knob and then pushed gently. The door was open. Opening it still further, inch by inch, I put my head into the hall. It was silent enough in there, and totally dark save for a crack of light that came from the room into which I had just been gazing. And realising that it was now or never, I drew out my pistol, took it in

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my right hand, and stole into the gloom. Once within, I paused for a second, feeling the flooring with the tip of my shoe. Carpeted!—and thickly. I went on at that, treading like a cat, and advancing with meticulous care, lest I should collide with any furniture that might be there. And at last I was close to the door—and heard the voices of those within.

“ High time he was here ! ” said a man’s voice, grumblingly. “ More than time ! ”

“ It is all the fault of that dam post office ! ” said another voice, presumably the little, foreign-looking man’s. “ If miss here had only got my card when she did ought to have got it, then we see him in the City, eh ? ”

“ I didn’t get it ! ” said Mrs. Kennerley’s voice, sharp and irascible. “ I’ve told you so a hundred times ! You should have posted it earlier.”

“ I post him in ver’ good time—it is not yet midnight, last night, when I post him,” protested the previous speaker. “ He ought to have been at you with the milk, as your saying is. The post office people is no dam good ! ”

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There was silence once more. One of the men yawned. I got a step nearer and continued to see into the room; I wanted to perfect my plan of final attack. Mrs. Kennerley and the big man were on the other side of the table, near the fireplace; the little man sat on its edge facing the door; he, therefore, would first confront me when I made my rush. I hurriedly decided how to do that; how to cover them, seize the diamond, and fly. Now for it....

I had my left hand on the upper panels of the door and was just about to shove it wide as I made my spring forward, when, without my ever hearing a sound or having the least suspicion that anyone was near me, my arms were seized from behind by two big, muscular hands that gripped like vices, and I was flung forward like a feather into the room, twisted round as if I had been a straw caught in the wind, and thrust face-fronted against the wall, crushed there like an impaled insect, unable to move. The pistol, shaken from my hand in that sudden assault, dropped harmlessly to the floor.

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I heard a series of sharp, startled exclamations in my rear as this happened; the voices of the men, the thinner note of the woman. Close behind me I was conscious of a man's deep, somewhat hurried breathing. That was my captor. He had me in such a position that I could not turn my head; once, making a move as if I meant to do so, he banged my forehead against the wall with such violence that I saw a myriad stars flash; I judged from the very strength of his grip and his movements that I had fallen into the hands of a giant. But the fur-coated man was upon us, and so was the other.

"What the devil's this?" demanded the first. "Who's this fellow?" My captor gave me a shake.

"Stole in through the front door," he said, still a little breathless from his exertions. "I spotted him and watched him listening at this—— Look there!—a pistol. Automatic!"

"Twist him round!" said the fur-coated man. "Let's have a look at him! Mr.—anybody know him?"

"I know him!" answered Mrs. Ken-

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nerley. "An interfering young fool! You'd better fasten him up safely till we've done our business. He must have followed us."

I was wondering whether to speak or to keep silence. But the impulse to foolhardiness had evaporated; I began to use what wits I had left. They had got me!—that was certain. But there was Rosalie outside, and Metham had run for help assistance and freedom was sure to come soon. So I remained silent, glaring at them. Mrs. Kennerley said something in an undertone to the two men; the fur-coated man nodded at my captor; the little man, glancing round, proceeded to cut down two stout cord bell-ropes that hung on either side the fireplace.

They tied me up, safely and securely, by my elbows and ankles, in such a fashion that I couldn't move. That done they threw me rather than seated me in a chair in the corner. I saw then what a big man it was that had seized me—a great fellow well over six feet in height. Not an Englishman, I could see—a big, blonde, fair-complexioned devil of a Saxon, I thought. He

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it was who dropped me into the chair—and when he had done so, he turned to the fur-coated villain and seemed to suggest some further outrage. His suggestion materialised—between them he and the little man successfully gagged me, fastening cloths about my mouth and ears in such a fashion that I could not speak at all and could only hear dully. Having settled me, the four drew together and talked in whispers. Presently, evidently as a result of their conference, the big man quietly slipped out of the room. And in a few minutes, every nerve of my body was thrilled to hear a scream—a woman's scream! It was sharp, clear—but then it was stifled—crushed—as if a heavy hand had fallen on the protesting lips. But the stifled cries came nearer—and suddenly the big blonde brute strode into the room, carrying Rosalie crushed in his great arms and with a hand over her mouth. He flung her from him with a curse—and I saw then, delightedly, that she had torn his smooth, pink cheeks in her efforts to free herself, and that blood was flowing freely towards his chin.

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Rosalie turned like a wild cat on the woman as the man released his grip. But before she had reached her, the others intervened; there was a sharp struggle, the sight of which drove me, helpless as I was, nearly frantic; then they forced her within the folding doors behind me, and closed them on her. For some reason best known to herself, she became silent.

The fur-collared man turned to the big fellow, who, still growling and cursing, was wiping his fat face.

"Was she all?" he asked.

"I saw no other! She—hiding in the gateway. I was on her and seized her before she knew." He turned suddenly towards me. "This one?" he said, glancing at the man who was evidently his master. "He may have things on him—more arms, eh?"

"See!" said the fur-collared man, laconically.

I daresay I glared madly at that fellow as he came near me again. He took no more notice of me than of the chair I lay in, and his big hands were light enough as

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he went through my pockets. It was little of any note that he found there. But he drew out the postcard and letter which I had brought away from the flat in Wells Street, and these with my money and other effects he passed over to his master. He, glancing at the letter and postcard, handed them to Mrs. Kennerley. She frowned angrily as she saw them; I saw at once that she realised that I had been in her rooms. She looked at the postcard and made some remark about it to the little man, and she was just going to draw the letter from its envelope when a sudden sound from without made her and the men start and listen. She thrust the letter in her pocket—unread.

The cloths about my ears were tied so tightly that I could hear next to nothing when these people lowered their voices. But I could see all that went on. At the sound from without they sprang into movement. The fur-collared man strode towards the door; half-way to it he stopped, pointing first at me, then at the folding-doors through which Rosalie, struggling and protesting, had been thrust. But

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Mrs. Kennerley shook her head, and I caught her reply.

“No!—she’d release him! That screen!—put it in front of him!”

The big blonde brute laid hold of a tall screen that stood in a corner close by, and moved it between me and the table. Probably he thought that I was thereby effectively hidden—I might be, from the centre of the room, but by twisting my head a little, I could see the door into the hall. And that, for the next two or three minutes, was worth watching. The fur-collared man went out and turned towards the hall door through which I, now to my vast regret, had stolen ten minutes previously—ten minutes that seemed ten hours!—and disappeared. The other men went out, too—and turned in another direction. I knew then that Mrs. Kennerley was left alone in that room and that the fur-collared man was going to bring somebody to her. Who?—from whom had the sound come? And—how long would it be before Metham came back, as I knew he would come back. He was our only hope—if he didn’t come, I scarcely dared to think of what might

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happen. But he must come—he would come, to find Rosalie and myself vanished to be sure, though that would only serve to make him keener on entering the house. When would his assistants, police, whoever they were, come, though? And in the meantime....

I heard voices in the hall, and strained my ears till my head, already sore from the bang which my captor had given it against the wall, seemed like to burst. Then the fur-collared man appeared, very bland and spare of manner, ushering into the room another man. And that was the very oldest man I think I have ever seen, as far, at any rate, as facial appearance went. It was the face of a mummy that I saw when the guide stepped aside and revealed the visitor who followed—a face on which a wrinkled parchment skin was stretched over bones and muscles from which all the covering and surrounding flesh seemed to have vanished. Some such face one might find perhaps in some Tibetan temple or by the banks of a sacred river of Oudh, under the cowl of a Lama or above the picturesque rags of a fakir ; I should certainly never have

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expected to see it in a house on Campden Hill. But there it was, under a frieze of grizzled hair, from which a fashionable silk hat had just been removed by its wearer, who, despite his mummy-like countenance, was a smartly-dressed old person, attired in the very height of fashion and carrying himself jauntily. And if his face looked like that of a man who had seen his hundredth year, his eyes, black and brilliant, were as bright and keen as those of a young man, and they grew still keener as he looked into the centre of the room.

“ Ah ! ” he exclaimed in a high-pitched, strong voice, evidently addressing himself to Mrs. Kennerley, as he went forward out of my view. “ There you are, ma’am, and there, I suppose, is the little matter you wish me to see ? Ah—just so—just so ! ”

The fur-collared man, lingering behind, closed the door—and I saw him turn the key in it. I knew then that I was alone with these three : the woman, her chief accomplice, and the mummy-faced person, whoever he might be ; I knew, too, that as far as I was concerned, I was no more

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than a piece of the surrounding furniture, for I could neither cry out nor move. The fur-collared man passed the screen and no doubt joined the other two; I fancied them, all three, bending over the diamond on the table. The room grew silent. These people may have been talking in low voices. But it was a big room—some thirty feet square—and the table about which I supposed them to have gathered was placed at the further end, away from me and near the window overlooking the garden. Now that they had all gone in that direction, I, of course, could see nothing of them, and as long as they spoke in murmurs, could hear nothing, either. But I could see what was around me, between the screen and the folding door through which Rosalie had been forced. Close by the chair into which they had thrown me stood a small occasional table. And on it lay the things which the big Saxon brute, as I called him in my thoughts, had torn from my pockets. Amongst them were two objects which I would have given a fortune to be able to handle for five minutes—aye, two minutes! One was my trusty pocket-knife, no mere

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pencil-sharpening, nail-trimming thing, ivory-handled and effeminate, but a thoroughly dependable weapon with at least one blade in it that would hack off the stoutest twig of any tree ; the other was my automatic pistol. If only I could get even one hand free....

Suddenly, I was aware of the faintest, the very faintest sound close behind my right shoulder. I made a painful effort, and slewed my face round. And then, out of my eye corner I saw the folding doors open!—the merest thread of an opening. I knew that was Rosalie's work ; her hand was at the door, her eye at the crack. It widened more—still more—she was looking into the room. And whether I had any telepathic influence over her, or whether her naturally smart wits were working as if the brain that controlled them was packed in ice, I don't know, nor do I now care—what I do know is that all of a sudden she had glided into that room like a shadow, and that her left hand went straight to the knife and her right to the slit in its big blade, and that she turned on me with a look which showed that her nerves were

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strung to going through with things. At last we were for it!—but for what?

I always kept the edge of that blade sharpened to razor-like keenness, and she cut through the cords that bound me with a couple of swift, silent slashes. My tightly-compressed hands and wrists had felt numb till then, but the numbness vanished before the desperation with which I reached for and grasped that pistol. Just as silently as she had released me I rose to my feet, motioning her aside with a warning look. Pistol in hand I took one step towards the screen. I scarcely knew what I was going to do; my idea, somewhat confused, no doubt, was that I was going to force a way out for the two of us, through the garden window. But before I could show myself, before we made a step or a sound, there was a sudden commotion in the room. It seemed as if somebody started violently, as if a chair were upset, something thrown over. And above the sound rose the queer old man's high, vibrant voice, angry, indignant, puzzled.

“This is no diamond!—worth two hundred thousand pounds, or two hundred thousand

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pence! It's a fraud!—an imitation!—a piece of glass! What do you mean by it?—why have you brought me here?—Why—”

I shoved the screen aside, and with the pistol levelled, strode into the room.

CHAPTER XII

THE ACID TEST

IT would be difficult for me to imagine a silence deeper, more intense than that which followed on the old gentleman's excited and indignant exclamations. But intense and deep as it was, it lasted no more than a second. The fur-collared man broke it, with a queer-sounding laugh, in which there seemed to me a strange mingling of incredulity and suddenly-awakened suspicion.

"Not a diamond?" he ejaculated. "Oh, come, Mr. Ellerbrook, come! We know it to be a diamond, and a unique one at that. Not a diamond! Mrs. Kennerley——"

"Of course it's a diamond!" exclaimed Mrs. Kennerley, with a contemptuous laugh. "As if I didn't know——"

There came a sound like the sudden thumping of a table; then the old gentle-

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man's voice, angrier, more indignant than ever.

"As if *I* didn't know, madam!" he vociferated. "You?—what do you know about diamonds in comparison with what I know—me! I tell you this is no diamond—it's an imitation thing. What do you mean by bringing me here—to this strange house—to see a thing like that? My impression is you're a couple of impostors—stand you out of my way, sir!"

"Not till we get a clearer understanding!" said the other man, with a touch of ugliness in his tone. "We say this is a diamond, and you're not going till——"

There was the slight sound of a scuffle, or the beginning of one, and with a whispered word to Rosalie and a firm gripping of the automatic pistol, I shoved the screen aside, and strode into the middle of the room. The big man had his hand on the old gentleman's shoulder; the old gentleman was squirming and protesting fiercely; Mrs. Kennerley, standing by the table, at sight of me let out a cry of astonishment. And as the fur-collared fellow turned to gasp and stare I let him look into the barrel of my weapon..

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"Let that old gentleman alone, you!" said I. "Sharp's the word!" That he was a chicken-hearted coward, despite his size and swagger, I saw at once. His fat jowl dropped and wobbled; his cheeks turned the colour of grey paste, and he not only dropped his hand but shrank back, lining himself up with the woman. The old gentleman, trembling and panting, turned on me.

"Who — what — what——" he began. "You——"

"All right, sir!" I said hurriedly. "Whether that's a diamond or not, I know all about it, and whatever it is these people have stolen it. That woman is a thief, and the man——"

The man took a step forward—and went back again before the levelled pistol. But Mrs. Kennerley suddenly made a dive at a side-table. There was a brass bell on it—one of those things that you hit on the top to make it ring; she brought down her open palm on it, once, twice. The next instant there were sounds at the door; it swung open and the big blonde brute rushed in, followed by the little man. For

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a second they stood staring; confounded, no doubt, by the sight of me, whom they had left tied up and helpless, now waving a pistol in their faces.

“At him, Max!” hissed the fur-collared man. “That side—all together!”

The fellow wavered for an instant. Then he came on—and I hesitated no longer. I fired, aiming straight at his shoulder; to my utter astonishment as the crack of my pistol rang out, it was almost instantly followed by another, close behind me, and as I twisted round, sure that I had hit my man, I saw the little old gentleman calmly waving a revolver of his own at the man and woman on the other side of the table. I saw, too, that the man had clapped his left hand to his right forearm, and that he was spitting out curses between his teeth.

“I, too, was armed!” whispered the old gentleman. “Strangers!—strange house!—thought it best. Your man—is he hit?”

My man was hit, right enough. He had tumbled clean back over the very chair into which he had thrown me, letting out a sharp yell as he collapsed. But now he

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sat up, groaning—from the fact that his right hand was clutching at his left shoulder, high up, I concluded that I had put a bullet exactly where I meant it to go. As for the other man, at the first crack of the pistol, he had made for the door, flung it open and leapt into the hall.

And now, just as hurriedly, he leapt back, white of face, shouting in his fear.

“The police! Here—back—front! The other room—the garden windows!”

He was tearing at the folding doors and the other two were starting from behind the table when there came a rush of heavy feet down the hall, and Metham burst in, followed by several men in uniform. Metham glanced quickly at Rosalie, and from her to me.

“You’re neither of you hurt, Mr. Gregg?” he asked anxiously. “We heard shots——”

“We’re all right,” said I. “Those two men are hit—we had to fire at them in self-defence. You’d better collar the lot,” I went on, addressing a police-sergeant who seemed to be in charge. “Don’t let any one of them get away, at any rate—and look after that!” I concluded, pointing

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to the diamond which still lay glittering on the table. "That's the cause of the whole affair!"

He was a cool, level-headed man, that police-sergeant, and he had a twinkle in his eye that betokened his possession of a keen sense of humour. He took a comprehensive glance all round, muttered a word or two to the constables with him, and turned to me again.

"What's happened, sir?" he asked. "We know what Mr. Metham told us—but what's been going on here? Shooting, eh?—by the sound and smell."

I told him, briefly and plainly; he turned from me to the old gentleman.

"And you, sir?" he said. "How came you here?"

"Asked to come here, my good man, by that man over there," answered the old fellow, who still held his revolver dangling at his side. "A scoundrel, I take it—a bad lot——"

"Just so, sir," interrupted the sergeant. "But if I were you, sir, I'd just slip that revolver of yours into your pocket, or wherever you carry it—that's better, sir—nasty

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things to have about, promiscuous, like. Asked you here, did he, sir——”

“To see that thing!” continued the old gentleman. “Wanted me to buy it—said it was one of the finest diamonds in the world! Of course, when I came to examine it, I knew at once that it was not a diamond! And when I said so that man laid violent hands on me, and if it hadn’t been for this young gentleman—well, I don’t know what mightn’t have happened!”

“Money on you, no doubt, sir?” suggested the sergeant. “Large amount, perhaps?”

“I’ve got my cheque-book on me,” replied the old man, dryly. “But not to be used for imitation diamonds! Diamond!” he exclaimed, indignantly. “What vexes me is that anyone of my reputation should be asked to waste his time in inspecting——”

“It is a diamond!” suddenly protested Mrs. Kennerley. “A diamond——”

“You know nothing about diamonds, my good woman, or rather my bad one!” retorted the old man. “That is *not* a diamond! If there’s any man alive who knows more about diamonds than I do, I should like to see him! My name is Ellerbrook,”

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he went on, turning to the police-sergeant, who by this time looked exceedingly puzzled, "John Ellerbrook—well known on both sides the Atlantic—most folk know me and credit me with being one of the six richest men in the world. Perhaps I am—and certainly I'm a buyer of rare things. But I'm not easily taken in, and when this woman says that's a diamond, I say she doesn't know what she's talking about. If anybody who ever owned it was fool enough to believe that thing is a genuine stone——"

Mrs. Kennerley suddenly moved away from the men who were standing guard over her and the fur-collared man. She picked up the letter that had been taken from my pocket, and which she had not read when the man near handed it and the postcard to her. Now she drew the sheet of paper from the already opened envelope, and, while the rest of us stood watching her, read over the cypher communication which had so puzzled Metham and myself when we saw it in the Wells Street flat.

"Look at her!" suddenly whispered Rosalie at my side. "Look!"

There was something to look at. Mrs.

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Kennerley's face grew white. Then it turned red—dark red. She gasped a little. The red faded—grew dull ; remained as an angry flush ; her eyes grew vindictive. Just as suddenly as she had made for and picked it up, she now flung the letter down and turned towards the door.

“ Let me go ! ” she exclaimed, with a sharp note of desperation. “ I've been tricked !—deceived ! Let me go, I tell you——”

She was agile and lithe in her movements, and had got nearly to the door before the policemen stopped her. And just as one of them laid a detaining hand on her arm the door opened, and in walked Corland, and behind him—Mr. Vandamarke !

Once more there was a second's—literally a second's—silence. The newcomers came to a halt, staring all round. Then Corland spoke, addressing himself to me, perhaps because I still had my pistol in my hand. His voice sounded refreshingly ordinary and commonplace.

“ Anybody hurt ? ” he asked.

I waved my pistol at the wounded miscreants.

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"Slight scratches, I should say!" I answered. "Their own fault! Justifiable——"

But Corland had turned from me already. He was looking at Mr. Vandamarke. And Mr. Vandamarke, curiously quiet, had put on his spectacles, and with his chin raised a little was looking over the bridge of his nose at the various folk in the room. For the first time since I had made his acquaintance I did not like the look in his eyes; at any rate, I should not have liked him to look at me as he looked at two people out of the several before him. There was a certain hardness and pitilessness in his glance that argued badly for them, and when he spoke his voice was like ice or steel—whichever you like. It seemed to me, anyway, to be cold as one and cutting as the other.

"Um!" he said, looking the fur-collared man from top to toe. "You—eh? Um!" He turned on Mrs. Kennerley. "You—ah! Trafferdale, of course, I have already seen. Um—just so!" He twisted round on the old gentleman, examining him curiously. "And—you, sir?"

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"I've just told these people who I am, Mr. Vandamarke," answered the old man promptly. "I know you, though, if you don't know me! I'm John Ellerbrook—you'll know that name, I think. Queer place—and queer conditions—to meet in and under, Mr. Vandamarke!"

Mr. Vandamarke's tone remained icy.

"And what may Mr. John Ellerbrook be doing here?" he asked. "Business?"

"Lured here, sir!" retorted the old gentleman, with indignant emphasis. "Lured here!—by these two—that woman!—that man!—on pretence of buying a diamond of fabulous value. That thing!—on the table—which isn't a diamond at all!"

We all turned on Mr. Vandamarke—Rosalie and myself with something more than eager interest. For here, surely, was the crucial moment—if that wasn't the Vandamarke diamond....

But Mr. Vandamarke had picked up the thing and was balancing it in the palm of his left hand. He turned a shrewd and cynical eye on Mr. Ellerbrook.

"But you'll admit it's a splendid imitation of one?" he said, half-jokingly. "Not

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everybody is such a judge—not everybody has such powers of discrimination—as Mr. Ellerbrook! No!” he added, raising his voice, and throwing the counterfeit back on the table. “Of course it’s not a diamond! It’s a sham!—a replica, cunningly wrought, of....my diamond! And that’s safe—somewhere else!”

I heard Rosalie catch her breath, and I knew what she was thinking. I was feeling that way myself. I had a vision of all that she and I had gone through during the last twenty-four hours....and I did not at that moment feel particularly well disposed towards Mr. Vandamarke. But he was speaking again.

“I’ll tell you how all this came about, Mr. Ellerbrook,” he continued, turning to the old gentleman. “Whether you’re aware of it or not, I was, until recently, a comparative stranger to this country. When I came here, last spring, I wanted to do a certain amount of business. You can’t do business without people to do it with. Therefore, you’ve got to know people. I got to know some”—here he favoured the fur-collared man and Mrs. Kennerley with

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a significant glance—" and out of that some, certain men seemed to be a crooked lot ! I feared that—a man in my position is the natural prey of sharks and parasites—and I wanted to know who was who and which was which. I remember once reading of a man who weeded out his friends by hanging a hearthrug from his front window with a sheriff's execution notice pinned to it—his ruse was highly successful. I couldn't do that very well, but I did know how to lay a trap. I possess one of the finest and most valuable diamonds ever brought to light—that, as I say, is a skilfully made counterfeit of it—and I let it be known that I possessed it, and what's more, I allowed people to believe that I always carried it about me. Do you follow me, Mr. Ellerbrook ?—you see, I wanted to make a test, a real acid test, of these people. In the end what I had rather shrewdly anticipated came off—I was quietly kidnapped, in company with that youngster there, carried away, and forced to disgorge—that ! I'd an idea—more than an idea—all along as to the moving spirit in the plot. I thought he was Trafferdale—I sus-

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pected him from the beginning. And—I was wrong! Trafferdale was—that woman’s catspaw!”

He pointed a finger at Mrs. Kennerley, and when he went on speaking, kept it pointed.

“I’m an old fool!” he said, with a grim chuckle. “I never suspected her! She’s an artful, clever, designing woman—she deceived me very successfully. I suspected her so little, Mr. Ellerbrook, that knowing she was (professedly) anxious about this matter, of which I’d told her privately, and desirous of relieving her anxiety, I actually wrote to her—in cypher—from Birmingham last evening telling her what until then she didn’t know—that the stolen article was not the real diamond but its counterfeit. Why she should have persisted in this attempted deal in face of my letter——”

“She’s only just had that letter, sir!” said I, starting forward and picking up the sheet of paper which Mrs. Kennerley had crumpled up and thrown away. “I can tell you why, afterwards—but it isn’t ten minutes since she found out that this wasn’t the real diamond.” He looked a little sur-

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prised, a little puzzled, at this, but he shook his head.

“That explains her seeming persistence, then, in face of the letter,” he said, “but it doesn’t explain her treachery! She laid this plot to rob me, her employer!—and laid it very cleverly, Gregg. I’ve seen Trafferdale in hospital this afternoon—I and Corland have seen him. She tricked him and drugged him—but there, here’s the end! I’ve no more to say, except that if you, Mr. Ellerbrook, like to call on me, I’ll show you the real diamond! Gregg!—I think you and Rosalie had better come home—the car’s outside.”

He turned away as if unconcernedly, but suddenly twisted back and picked up the sham diamond. Before anybody could stop him, he threw it in the fire. There was a hiss, a slight explosion....

The next thing was that the police-sergeant came to the front of things. He had listened to all that went on with an air of almost benevolent toleration—as if he had been attending to some child who explained a puzzle or a game.

“What about these two, gentlemen?”

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he asked, pointing his thumb at the culprits. "And those two men? Is anybody going to charge them?—and with what?"

Mr. Vandamarke motioned to me and Rosalie to follow him, and made for the door.

"I'm not!" he said brusquely. "Let 'em go their own way! They won't cross mine again."

We went to Prince's Gate in silence. Mr. Vandamarke seemed as if he had no wish to talk! Rosalie stared out of the windows at the lights and appeared to be abstracted; as for myself, I had nothing to say. I was for going home when we reached the Vandamarke door, but they would not hear of it—both insisted that I must stay to dinner.

"Moreover, *I* want you to come in!" whispered Rosalie with marked emphasis. "You've got to!"

I went in. Rosalie marshalled her father and me into the queer little Dutch room in which I had made my first acquaintance with the house. She closed the door and turned on Mr. Vandamarke.

"Now, father!" she said, peremptorily.

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"I'm going to have it out with you, in Mr. Gregg's presence! You've treated him and me very badly—very wickedly! We've been through all sorts of unpleasant adventures to-day, and into real danger—Mr. Gregg especially—all because of you and your schemes! I don't mind your doing anything you like to find out whom you can trust, and whom you can't, and I'm thankful you've found out that cat of a woman!—but you might have taken me and Mr. Gregg into your confidence. I think you owe us both a profound apology! But I shan't let you off with that—do you hear?"

Mr. Vandamarke winked at me over Rosalie's shoulder; I never saw a man look less repentant nor more unashamed.

"Well, my dear, and what will you take to let me off?" he asked, pulling his daughter's ear playfully. "A new gown, eh?"

"No nonsense!" she said. "I shall take nothing less than that diamond!—the real, genuine one. You'll give it to me, for my very own—just now!"

"That can't be done!" he laughed. "It's locked up—at the bank."

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"Then—to-morrow morning," she insisted. "Say you will, now! I won't forgive you for anything less. And if you won't—then you'd better quake in your shoes!"

"That's not appealing!" he said, still laughing. "Very well—you shall have it! By noon to-morrow."

Presently he left the room. Rosalie turned to me.

"As soon as that diamond is in my hands," she said, with a mysterious confidingness, "I shall put it in yours. I can trust you to put it somewhere where it'll be absolutely safe and at my disposal. No more games with it!"

It was then that the most brilliant idea I had ever had in my life sprang piping hot from my youthful brains.

"I'll accept the trust!" I said impetuously. "On one condition!"

She turned and looked at me, and for some reason her colour deepened.

"Condition?" she exclaimed. "What condition?"

"That you go with the diamond!" said I valiantly. "Come, now!"

I dare not allege that she didn't say that

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this was sudden ; she was old-fashioned in some degree, and perhaps she did. Never mind !—within five minutes I knew that my strange adventure had ended in a most sweet success.

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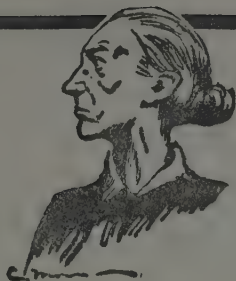
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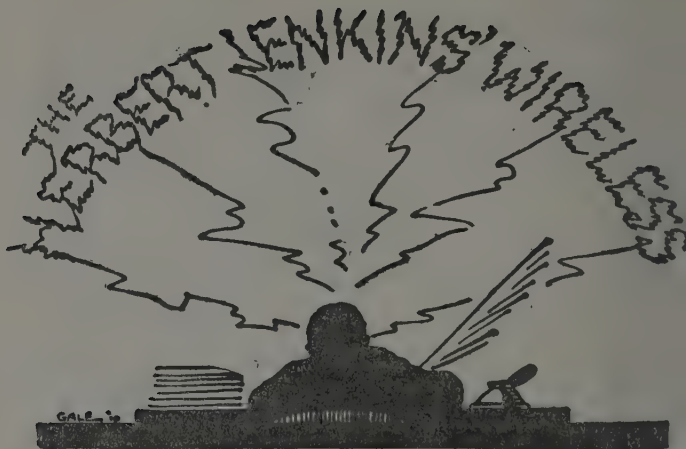
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